

CREMATION IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

*Death, fire and identity in
North-West Europe*



HOWARD **WILLIAMS** AND FEMKE **LIPPOK** (EDS)

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Foreword: Death and Fire

Frans Theuws

Mourning the death of a beloved relative, a neighbour, a friend, is universal. The form of this mourning and the treatment of the dead as part of strategies for dealing with the dead is not. The bewildering diversity of deathways is the subject of a fundamental line in Metcalf and Huntington's classic *Celebrations of Death* (Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 24). This is because, at the death of a person, an extensive series of decisions have to be taken. In the human past, as today, a specialist visits the house of the mourners to arrange the funeral and those left behind are confronted with an almost impossible range of possibilities on how to deal with the deceased person.

Mortuary practices are not just emotional affairs: dealing with the dead affects the fundamental aspects of human life. It is for that reason that burial can be considered a prime example of what Marcel Mauss coined 'total social facts', an event in which the fundamental values, norms and ideas of a society are at stake, are negotiated upon, are adjusted, accepted or not accepted (Mauss 1990: 78). So, it is those values, norms and ideas that should be at the forefront of burial archaeology. They are at work when a first fundamental choice has to be made: how to deal with the dead body. Burning the body together with animals and objects (or not) or burying it intact, adorned in the most beautiful way (or not) reveal different ideas about the nature of the dead body, not necessarily the same ideas as those about the body alive. The same goes for the later fragmentation of the human remains, by selecting only a small portion of the cremated bone, reopening an inhumation grave to take out objects and bones as well, or depositing a part of the body in the water or in another place. Such decisions show that the 'burial', whatever the form chosen, is actually not an event in the sense of a particular moment in time, but a long process that can last from a day or a week to maybe even two or three decennia.

With its remarkable process of creation based on interviews, this book offers a new consciousness for the analyses of the burial remains from the Early Middle Ages, not just traces of cremating the dead in varied ways, but also other forms of dealing with dead bodies. It tries to move us away from the traditional homogenising culture-historical approaches prevalent in burial archaeology of the Early Middle Ages across much of Europe. Archaeologists might wonder if written texts did not put us on the wrong foot when interpreting the burial rites. Today we realise, thanks to what is called the 'literary turn' in historiography, that the texts of the past cannot be used as ethnographic reports. They rather voice the often difficult-to-identify agendas of past writers, literate members of the elite part of society, who wrote on the basis of their own systems of values, norms and ideas often to advocate those norms. Aspects of their writings, often in the service of a political agenda, were happily copied by past generations of archaeologists as evidence for specific cultural and social formations, such as ethnic identity, hierarchical social organisation, being a Christian and defining the 'other' as barbarian. These were the

values (and goals) of the members of a '*culture savante*', framed in a series of identifiable dichotomies, which were easily applicable to the archaeological record (after the data had been organised accordingly). This approach does not do justice to the complexities and multi-layered nature of early medieval social organisation and systems of values. What about the '*culture populaire*' from which the majority of the data on burial rites originate, or do rural and non-elite persons from the early medieval past have no culture and values of their own?

Archaeology needs to build a new set of interpretations for the burial rites of the majority of the population. In this, it needs not copy the system of values of the '*culture savante*'. This is what happened in the past and what still haunts early medieval archaeology. One could bluntly put forward the proposition that, for instance, the ethnic interpretation of burial rites and material culture of the majority of the population, as well as the search for hierarchical social relations on the basis of variations in ensembles of grave goods, has paralysed the intellectual development of early medieval archaeology. Reading Metcalf and Huntington's book makes one realise that the images created of the burial remains from early medieval Europe based on simple dichotomies such as Roman-Barbarian (Germanic), Christian-Heathen, Soldier-Civilian and others are one of the poorest in the world with no role for active reflective agents. We have to do something about that. This book is an important contribution to a broader development in modern early medieval archaeology, which seeks to liberate itself from century-old outdated interpretative avenues. Some authors of this book's chapters rightly stress that there is still a long way to go, but this book is an important direction indicator along the route.

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Introduction: Death and Fire in Early Medieval North-West Europe

Femke Lippok and Howard Williams

Introducing this first-ever edited collection drawing together the latest research on the cremation of the dead in early medieval North-West Europe, the chapter identifies, rationalises and contextualises the book's aims: to rethink the burning of the dead in the context of other dimensions to mortuary practices in the early medieval period and showcasing the significant theoretical, methodological and investigative advances of recent decades. The scope and rationale of the book are outlined, focusing on providing a rich and accessible resource for students and scholars of archaeology and cognate fields. The chapter then explains the distinctive process of the book's creation: largely by transcribing and editing structured interviews. The nineteen constituent chapters of the book are then reviewed, and key themes and future directions are identified for the investigation of death and fire in the Early Middle Ages.

Cremation; deathways; early medieval; interdisciplinary; mortuary variability

Introduction

‘Cremation’ can be defined in broad terms as any ritual technology aimed at transforming the corporeal remains of the human dead, partly or wholly, via the medium and agency of fire. As such, it is more than a mechanical method of mortuary treatment, and instead a multi-faceted and varied phenomenon of past and present social and ritual life in which death and fire coincide (see Davies 2005a: xvii; Downes 1999). Presenting our developing interdisciplinary theories, refined field and lab-based methods, and a wide range of fresh discoveries, this edited collection seeks, for the first time, to explore the rich and varied evidence for early medieval (c. 400–1100 CE) cremation practices in North-Western Europe (here taken to include Fennoscandia, Continental North-West Europe and the North Atlantic Archipelago of Ireland and Britain) within the context of new scientific applications and contextual analyses. Where, when, how and why did early medieval communities cremate all or some of their dead? The book draws together the latest research and thinking on early medieval cremation practices in a select number of countries and regions through nineteen chapters and aims to be of interest to students and scholars of medieval archaeology and history, but also global research in the archaeology, bioarchaeology and anthropology of mortuary practices, and death studies more broadly. The background, context and rationale of the book are surveyed in this Introduction, and



Figure 0.1: One of the two early medieval cinerary urns discovered in Amerongen (Photograph by the gemeente Utrechtse Heuvelrug)

the book's distinctive process of creation by interview, as well as the foci of individual chapters, are reviewed. Finally, we identify key themes and future directions for the study of cremation in early medieval North-West Europe.

Background

During the final stages of the completion of this book, RTV Utrecht reported on a surprise discovery by a Dutch citizen in her allotment garden in the town of Amerongen, Utrecht, Netherlands (RTV Utrecht 2023). Two fully intact early medieval cremation urns were uncovered just below the modern ground surface. Likely dating to the fifth to seventh centuries CE, the find might superficially seem uninspiring, even mundane. The vessels were dark grey and undecorated and might not immediately strike those without archaeological training as pertaining to the distant past or human mortality at all. Yet the cinerary urns are testament to complex ritual processes as well as a further clue to a far larger cemetery on this spot (Figure 0.1). These remarkably intact early medieval cremation burials would have contained the ashes/cremains of one or more humans burned on an open-air pyre together with a range of artefacts, substances and perhaps animals (sacrificed and placed as whole animals or as food offerings, or as artefacts) before being selectively

collected, stored, transported and buried.¹ As such, this unexpected discovery speaks to us today of the death rituals of groups and communities living in North-West Europe during and following the fragmentation of the Western Roman Empire, the emergence of successor kingdoms and their complex, often slow and multi-staged conversion to the Christian faith. Early medieval graves embody an otherness of people and times long before the modern world, and yet they are simultaneously familiar for anyone who has witnessed or attended a cremation ceremony for a loved one or indeed even a family pet.

The chance find of a gardener in the Netherlands is the exception: such archaeological discoveries of early medieval cremation burials from North-West Europe rarely grab the media's attention. The fragmentary and

1 The products of cremation have traditionally been called 'ashes' in ethnographic, sociological and religious studies (Davies 2005a; 2005b) and in archaeology 'cremation' is often used to refer to the material traces as well as the process of burning the dead (McKinley 1994: 5-6). However, these terms are ambiguous and not sufficiently specific. In this study, the term 'cremains' will generally be used. For while it is a neologism thought to have been created by American funeral directors (Love 2005: 131) and it has been asserted that 'ashes' is more 'traditional' (Davies 2005b: 57; Davies 2005c: 131), 'cremains' is less euphemistic than 'ashes'. Moreover, it helps to explain the range of materials retrieved from archaeological deposits outside of modern Western cremation processes involving both the burning and crushing of bones (Davies 2005b: 57).

distorted traces of early medieval cremated human remains and associated material cultures hardly match popular modern perceptions of ‘stuff that dreams are made of’ (a line from the 1941 film *The Maltese Falcon* alluding to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*) and thus rarely hit the newspaper headlines. Nor do such traces readily engage the public and academic audiences who often fixate on well-preserved artefacts and human remains – mummies, bog bodies and lavish tombs full of ‘wonderful things’ (as Howard Carter famously saw when first looking into the tomb of Tutankhamun in 1922). Likewise, the ambiguous corporeality of cremated human remains, not immediately appearing ‘human’, with the body (and particularly the skull) not easily perceived without expert osteoarchaeological analysis, might disengage audiences. As a result, as for other periods and places, when early medieval burials are considered at all in popular culture, it is rare, rich furnished inhumation graves, like the early seventh-century ship-burial from Mound 1, Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, England, that spark media headlines, draw crowds to museums and heritage sites, and capture the popular imagination (Williams 2001; Carver 2005).

Yet cremation has long been recognised as an element of the early medieval past. Indeed, it has been considered since long before archaeology as a discipline emerged in the nineteenth century. Cremation was remembered in oral traditions surviving within medieval written sources, such as the Old English epic poem *Beowulf* (Williams *et al.* 2017: 1–2) or indeed the *Gesta Danorum* by Saxo Grammaticus recalling a legendary ‘age of burning’ (Ellis 1943: 30). In the modern era, early antiquarians began unearthing early medieval cremation burials, although misdated at the time (Williams 2006a: 1–3). By the nineteenth century, cremation burials were repeatedly identified as dating to the post-Roman centuries, and they began to be systematically recorded and discussed as part of romantic nationalist and racial paradigms for studying the early peoples of Europe and their contribution to the emergence of modern nations (Content and Williams 2010; Williams 2006b; e.g. Bequet 1886: 459). During the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, cremation graves were utilised in constructing refined cultural evolutionary and culture-historic paradigms for prehistoric and protohistoric ‘peoples’ and their origins, migrations and development as identified from their supposed distinctive material cultures and burial customs (Williams 2002, 2011). By the late twentieth century, these remains, while often neglected, were increasingly subjected to osteological analyses and incorporated into quantitative and qualitative analyses of mortuary variability and change in which social structures and symbolic systems were inferred (Richards 1987; McKinley 1994, 2013; Hills and Lucy 2013). Over the last quarter-century, new fieldwork,

laboratory analyses and interpretative frameworks have informed more refined and sophisticated interpretations of early medieval cremation, notably as a strategy in the construction of identity, cosmology and personhood in death and in the social memories of survivors (e.g. Williams 2003; Richards *et al.* 2004; Høilund Nielsen 2009; Oestigaard 2013; Squires 2012, 2013; Wright 2021).

For mortuary archaeologists today who seek to study the complex story of the human journey through variable deathways, cremation is integral to our endeavours in investigating dying, death, disposal and commemoration of the dead (Nilsson Stutz and Tarlow 2013). Over recent decades, early medieval archaeological research has worked hard to counter the relative neglect of cremation through sustained field, laboratory and desk-based investigations into disposal methods that are widespread in the archaeological record from prehistoric and early historic times, but which are often overlooked or underrepresented. This work has not only tackled excarnation and other post-burial strategies for collecting, curating and fragmenting the early medieval dead (Klevnäs *et al.* 2021). Over the last decade in particular, early medieval cremations have been subject to investigation alongside other prehistoric and early historic cremation practices (e.g. Sørensen and Bille 2009; Appleby 2013; Graham 2015; Wright 2021), including four invaluable edited collections as well as a host of research papers dedicated to this field of enquiry (Kuijt *et al.* 2014; Schmidt and Symes 2015; Thompson 2015a; Cerezo-Román *et al.* 2017).

It is now widely recognised that cremation is an important and still under-investigated phenomenon for understanding early medieval societies and their death rituals. Moreover, slowly but surely, the academic community is waking to the particular significance of cremation to people living across Europe today because the Early Middle Ages was the last era before the nineteenth-century re-emergence of modern indoor cremation when burning the dead was widely practised (cf. Williams *et al.* 2017). Of broader relevance than early medievalists but also of wider interest to groups and individuals practising/opting for cremation today, our task is to redress the long-term neglect of cremation practices and to critique simplistic and inaccurate interpretations of its use on grounds of chronology, religious affiliation and unfounded assumptions about the ethnic identity of the dead and mourners (see Lippok 2020). By exploring cremation in the early medieval archaeological record in fine-grained detail, contextually, and using a battery of theoretical approaches and innovative methods, we can build fresh and accurate archaeological narratives that reflect our evidence and speak to interdisciplinary debates in medieval studies and modern audiences (e.g. Veselka *et al.* 2021). It is the aspiration of this collection

to establish the study of early medieval cremation as an important avenue for understanding the diverse and changing deathways of early medieval people.

Context and rationale

Despite these developments and innovations, there has been no specific or detailed evaluation published of the developments and insights, problems and pitfalls of the archaeology of cremation for early medieval North-West Europe, identifying current and future directions for research. This justifies the necessity of this collection. Since completing his doctoral research, Williams has published a series of publications on early Anglo-Saxon cremation practices and their wider early medieval and cross-period context and significance (Williams 2000; see also, for example, Williams 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2014; Meyers Emery and Williams 2018). Meanwhile, Lippok's (2017) Master's research focused on mapping and analysing the relationship between early medieval cremation and inhumation graves across the German Rhineland, Belgium and the Netherlands (Lippok 2020). Combining our interests and expertise in the variability and social context of mortuary practices (Williams 2006a; Lippok in prep.), we devised a vision for a book project developed from a research workshop held at the University of Leiden and organised by Lippok in December 2018. Lippok and Williams both recognised the lack of a synthesis of theories, methods and data for early medieval cremation practices and rather than embarking on editing yet another standard 'proceedings' of a conference or workshop in an expensive edited collection, we decided to commission a wide range of expertise and survey work on early medieval cremation across a broader geographical range to create an original, open-access and easily digestible book in a distinctive format.

The specific rationale has been to rectify the dearth of an existing synthesis of the archaeology of cremation practices across North-West Europe and the varied regional and chronological contexts in which cremation is deployed alongside, and intersected with, other disposal methods and mortuary practices. But the intention was to do so by not only creating a snapshot of recent and ongoing research, including theories and analyses, field- and lab-based investigations, and capturing a clear and accurate sense of the strengths and challenges of our datasets. A further critical dimension of this synthesis is to provide a resource in order to combat misinformation and disinformation about the Early Middle Ages within and beyond the academy and specifically in fields of heritage discourse which interface between the two. Notably, the field of education and engagement takes place on social media as well via media news, documentaries and dramas, video games and other entertainment media, and via heritage sites and museums as well as specific

educational resources (see also Williams *et al.* 2020). Yet to tackle this ambitious project required a different approach and structure that enabled our experts to not only present their evidence around early medieval cremation practices but to reflect on that evidence in the context of cremation as wider-practised deathways and provide a specific focus upon current and future research trajectories.

The process of production

To maximise the utility of the book in these critical fashions, a distinctive mode of survey was devised focused on structured interviews supported by 'key data' sections. This approach built on Williams' editorial experiences working on the proceedings of public archaeology conferences in which the knowledge and insights of public educators, heritage practitioners and academics were captured by interview. These had been structured, transcribed and subsequently edited with the revision of the texts by authors and the addition of figures, tables and bibliography (see Williams *et al.* 2019; Williams and Clarke 2020; Gleave *et al.* 2020; Williams *et al.* 2022). The current book extended this approach to a new level, with carefully devised interview questions and follow-up multiple-staged authorial-editorial dialogue. In this fashion, sixteen interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams (Annaert, Knol, Masanz, Perry, Squires, Ó Riagáin, Wessman, Gleeson, Gardela (twice), Harland, Croix, Mason, Veselka, Ljungkvist and Rose) between September 2020 and December 2023, with Lippok and Williams contributing to the design and implementation of the interviews and conducting the post-interview editing of the texts supported by added textual revisions, citations, figures and tables by the interviewees/authors. Thus, contributors had opportunities to augment and clarify their texts, provide images and captions, and deal with editorial queries on content and style. An integral intention of the book was to combine the semi-formal style of the interviews with succinct and well-structured 'key data' sections highlighting core ideas, methods and techniques, sites, graves and discoveries. The questions set for each interview and associated 'key data' (where appropriate) were similar but not identical, as they were carefully adapted and refined to respond to the interviewees' specific theoretical, methodological and technical expertise and the nature of the archaeological datasets under discussion. Some authors discussed findings from comprehensive surveys, whilst others paid special attention to one or two particularly important or distinctive sites.

Three additional contributions augmented these sixteen chapters and were captured by either a questionnaire sent to each set of authors and comparable in their format to the structured interviews (Brunet *et al.* and Löffelmann) or (in one instance) a request pitched for

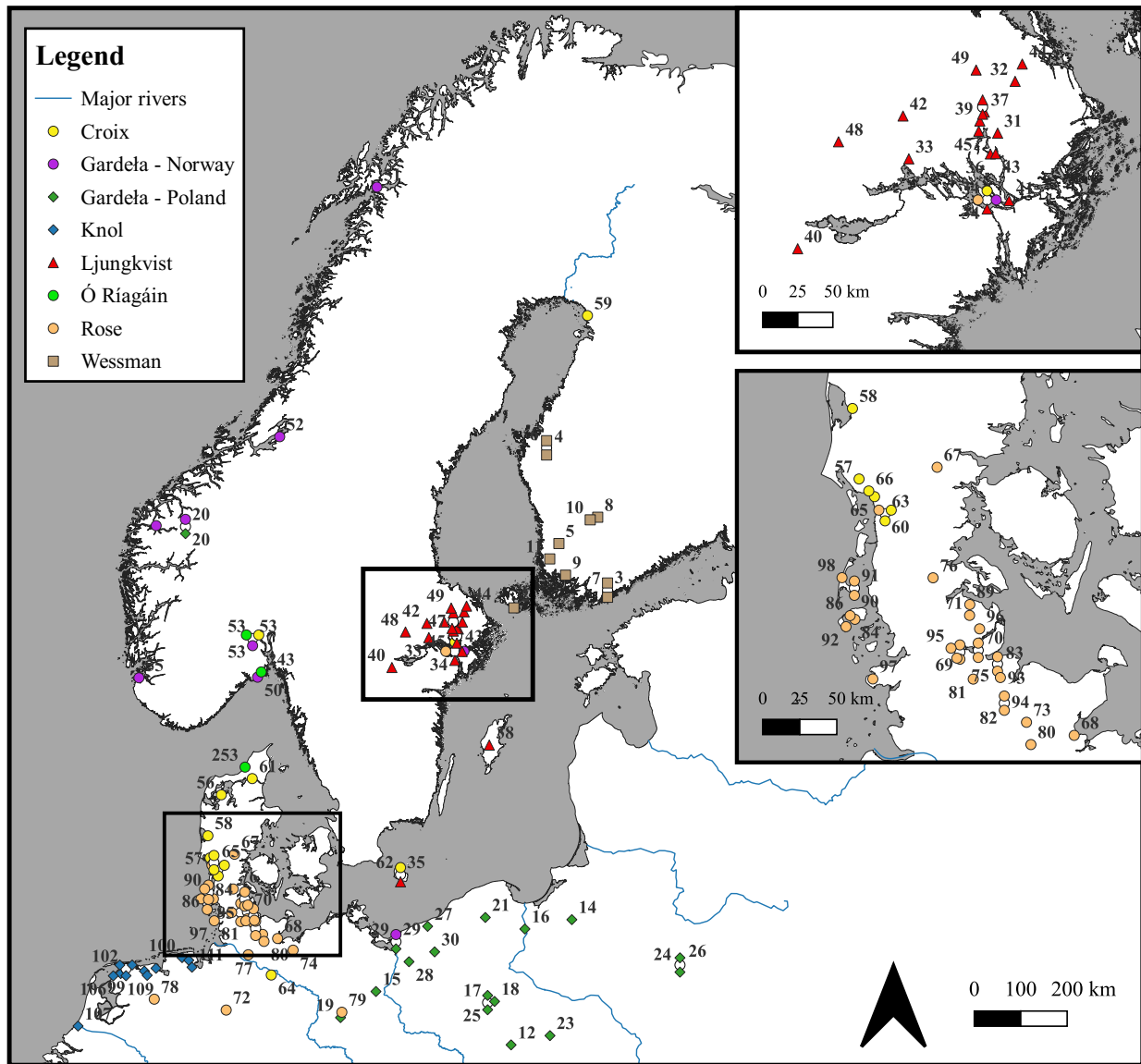


Figure 0.2: Overview of Fennoscandia and all referenced sites featured in the introduction (1. Amerongen), and articles by **Wessman** (2. Åland islands 3. Alsätra 4. Levänluhta 5. Luistari 6. Pukkila 7. Stora näset 8. Tampere 9. Turku 10. Tursiannotko 11. Vainonmäki), **Gardela** – Western Slavic (12. Bilczew 13. Bloaschütz 14. Cerkiewnik 15. Chorin 16. Cieple 17. Dziekanowice 18. Gniezno 19. Götz 20. Gutdalen 21. Jabłoń Wielki 22. Krak's mound in Kraków 23. Lutomiersk 24. Orzeszkowo 25. Ostrów Lednicki 26. Puszcza Białowieska 27. Świelubie 28. Warchlino 29. Wolin 31. Żółte), **Ljungkvist** (31. Alsike 32. Alunda 34. Badelunda 34. Birka 35. Bornholm 36. Forn-Sigtuna 37. Gamla Uppsala 38. Gotland 39. Håga mound, Uppsala 40. Kumla 41. Lunda on Lovön 42. Sala 43. Sigtuna 44. Skäfthammar 45. Tuna 46. Valsgärde I 47. Valsgärde II 48. Västmanland 49. Vendel) **Gardela** – Norway (20. Gutdalen 29. Wolin 34. Birka 50. Kaupang 51. Myklebostad 52. Nordre Kjølén 53. Oseberg 54. Sagastad 55. Sanddal) and **Croix** (34. Birka 53. Oseberg 56. Banehøj 57. Bryndum 58. Hedeby 59. Li 60. Lindegården 61. Lindholm Høje 62. Nørre Sandegård Vest 63. Ribe 64. Rullstorf 65. Store Darum 66. Tjæreborg). Mapped by James Dodd

a broader commentary (Maldonado). The choice to depart from an online interview for these chapters related to the specific circumstances and availability of the authors and to best facilitate their inclusion within the project's timescale. While these contributions differ in style and approach to the transcribed and augmented interviews, they allowed other key perspectives to join the collection in a fashion that is discrete from the style and structure of a traditional academic book chapter.

The result is a far-ranging, accessible and up-to-date evaluation of cremation in early medieval North-West Europe. We pay attention in each chapter not only to the subject matter but to the background, experiences and insights of the investigators themselves. Throughout, the focus is on the process, variability and spatiality of cremation practices, but where necessary, these are situated in relation to other disposal methods and mortuary dimensions.

Still, this is not to say that this innovative (and somewhat experimental approach) is not without its limitations. While the interview allowed for the capture of ideas rapidly and afforded authors opportunities to present information but also reflect on current practice and future directions, it presented a host of challenges for both speakers/authors and editors regarding how much of the informal style should be retained.

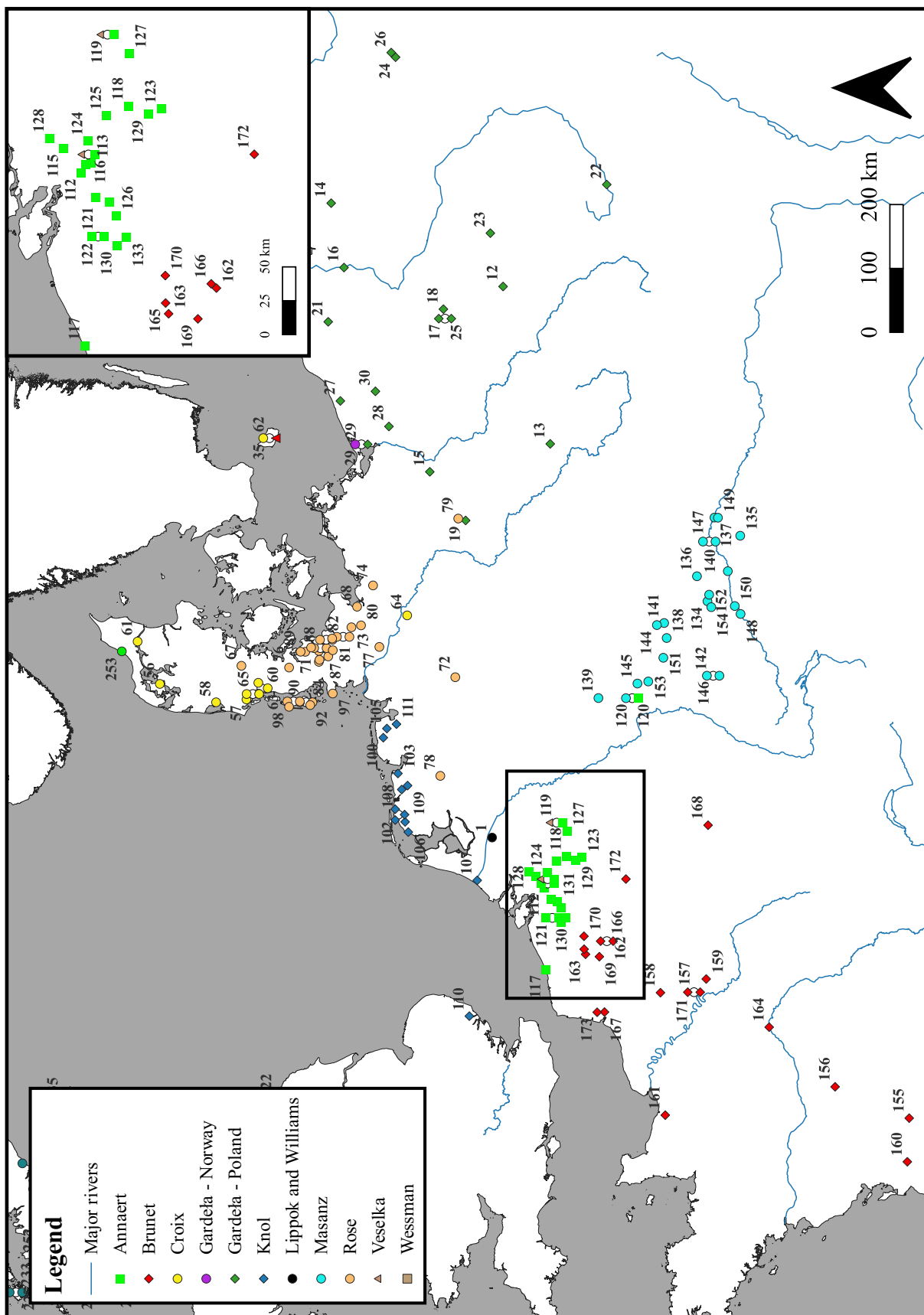
As well as the challenge of navigating a very new and distinctive way of working during and immediately after the global COVID-19 pandemic, as with any edited collection, there are inevitable geographical and chronological data-set gaps and arbitrary perimeters. Notable limitations in these regards include the absence of a review of cremation across the regions under discussion in the immediate centuries before the Early Middle Ages, both within and beyond the territories of the Western Roman Empire (although see Rose). Within the early

medieval period itself, there are large parts of southern Scandinavia, northern Germany and eastern Europe where cremation practices were prevalent that we do not address here (Grünwald 2005; Stefan 2007). We would also note that cremation practices are not yet recognised as a component of early medieval mortuary practices in western Britain (Wales and the South West peninsula including Cornwall) as opposed to south-east and northern Britain and Ireland. These lacunae need further consideration by future research to ensure they are real rather than the result of a host of taphonomic conditions and research biases. Indeed, for now, we should perhaps assume that cremation was familiar to all regions of North West Europe to varying degrees and has simply not been identified in some areas due to survival and dating issues, and also perhaps to archaeological research traditions not anticipating cremations uncovered might date to the Early Middle Ages (Herring *et al.* 2011; Shiner 2021).

Likewise, there are limits to the coverage of specific theories and themes, notably the critique and refinement of theoretical approaches that have become popular over the last two decades pertaining to personhood, emotion and social memory, although these themes are tackled repeatedly within specific contributions. Field methods and techniques are presented throughout, but not via a dedicated interview, and while scientific applications to cremated human remains and material cultures, as well as experimental archaeology, are considered in depth, specific anthracological, palaeobotanical and zooarchaeological studies are not included.

In the following review of the book, we aim to identify both common potentials and challenges as well as specific limitations/gaps in the discussion which merit attention in future research. Throughout this book's contributions, the variability of early medieval cremation practices will become apparent, and yet common themes emerged.

Figure 0.3: Overview of Continental North-West Europe and all referenced sites featured in the articles by **Rose** (34. Birka 63. Ribe 67. Egtved 68. Groß Timmendorf 69. Haithabu 70. Kosel-Ost 71. Sôrup 72. Liebenau 73. Mang de bargaen 74. Mühlen Eichenen 75. Neudorf-Bornstein 76. Olger Dyke 77. Pinneberg-Ratsberg 78. Sleen 79. Wachow 80. Bad Segeberg 81. Borgstedt 82. Bordesholm 83. Gettorf 84. Göting-Wasterbergem 85. Hosted and Hochburg 86. Hedehusum u. Süderende / Hedehusem-Wasserwerk 87. Jagel 88. Kosel-Ost 89. Langballigau, 90. Morsum 91. Morsum-Munkhoog 92. Nebel-Steenodde 93. Quarnbek 94. Schmalstede 95. Schuby 96. Süderbrarup 97. Tating-Esing / Haferacker 98. Wennigstedt), **Knol** (99. Beetgum 100. Dunum 101. Ezinge De Bouwerd 102. Ferwerd-Burmania 103. Godlinze 104. Hogebeintum 105. Jever-Clevers 106. Midlum 107. Oegstgeest 108. Oosterbeintum 109. Paddepoel III 110. Sutton Hoo / Tranmer house 111. Zetel), **Annaert** (112. Antwerp 113. Boechout 114. Borsbeek 115. Brecht 116. Broechem 117. De Panne 118. Donk 119. Echt 120. Frankfurter Dom 121. Ghent-Hoge Weg 122. Ghent-Port Arthur 123. Gingelom-Montenaken 124. Grobbendonk 125. Laakdal-Vorst 126. Lede 127. Maasmechelen-Mottekamp 128. Meer 129. Orsmaal-Gussenhoven 130. Semmerzake 131. Sint-Gillis-Dendermonde 132. Temse-Klein Broek 133. Velzeke-Bussege), **Masan** (120. Frankfurter Dom 134. Dittenheim 135. Ergolding 136. Freystadt 137. Friedenham 138. Gaukönigshofen 139. Gießen 140. Großprüfening 141. Hellmitzheim 142. Hessigheim 143. Ingolstadt 144. Kleinlangheim 145. Kleinwelzheim 146. Pleidelsheim 147. Regensburg 148. Schretzheim 149. Straubing 150. Tapfheim 151. Uissigheim 152. Weißenburg-Gunzenhausen 153. Wenigumstadt 154. Westheim), **Brunet et al.** (155. Agris 156. Barrou 157. Bonneuil-en-France 158. Bulles 159. Bussy-Saint-Georges 160. Chaniers 161. Giberville 162. Hordain 163. Houplin 164. La Chapelle-Saint-Mesmin 165. Lesquin 166. Neuville-sur-Escaut 167. Novion-en-Ponthieu 168. Prény 169. Quiéry-la-Motte 170. Tournai-Saint-Brice 171. Villiers-le-Bel 172. Vireux-Molhain 173. Vron), **Veselka** (116. Broechem 119. Echt. Mapped by James Dodd



Reviewing the book

We decided to arrange the book sequentially across the three principal subregions under investigation roughly from east to west: The Baltic and Fennoscandia (Figure 0.2), Continental North-West Europe (Figure 0.3), and the North Atlantic Archipelago (British Isles) (Figure 0.4). Chronologically, the discussions span the period of the fifth to eleventh centuries, but this varies within each contribution depending on local and regional patterns in the frequency and distribution of cremation practices so that some chapters focus attention on the fifth and early sixth centuries CE, others on the sixth to mid-eighth centuries CE, others still on the Viking Age (late eighth to mid-eleventh centuries CE). Several contributors reflect on long-term trends from prehistory into the early medieval period. As mentioned above, the survey is wide and in-depth, but there is no claim to tackle comprehensively every theme or locality, and the focus is as much on future work as past discoveries and interpretations.

Finland

Wessman tackles Finland's c. 250–300 Cremation Cemeteries Under Level Ground (CCULG) dating to the early medieval period (in Finland called the Late Iron Age). She evaluates the quality of the excavations, the character of these sites and the nature of the cremation practices which took place there. The nature of their distinctive long-term collectivity and modest monumentality is linked to ideas of personhood and how conceptions of fertility play a role in mortuary rituals. Wessman also considers the significance of these sites' reuse of earlier monuments and proclivity to accrue around natural landmarks. The weapons associated with burials on some CCULGs are also interpreted. The particular relationship between cremation and Christianisation is tackled, with Wessman arguing that it is too simple to

see Christian conversion as a direct and singular cause for the cessation of cremation practices. The need for further field investigation and scientific applications to understand the chronology and character of cremation practices is clearly outlined.

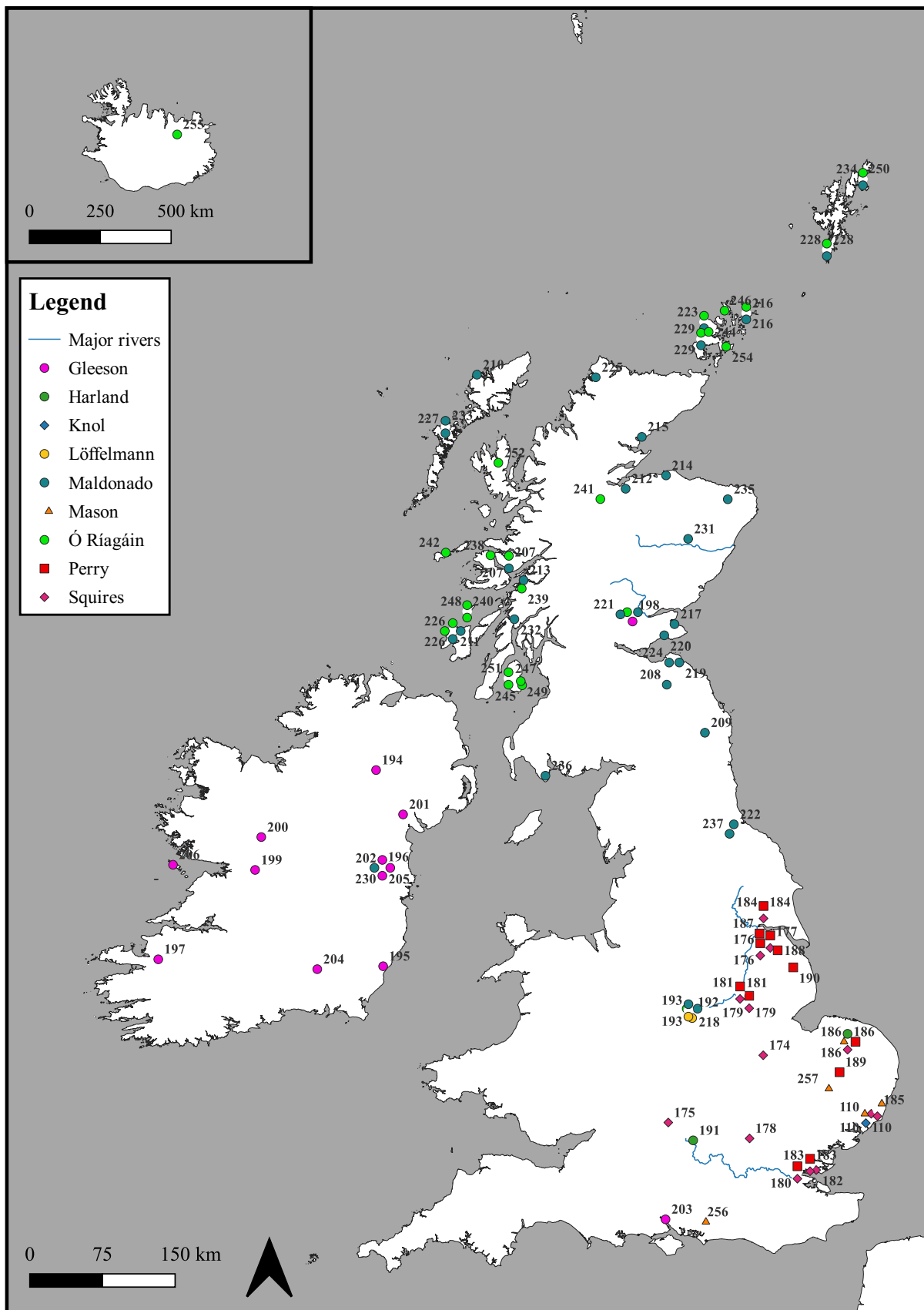
Poland

Moving south across the Baltic, we next explore western Slavic cremation practices. Gardela considers the variability and character of cremation practices and focuses on the site of Lutomiersk, Poland. The history of archaeology provides the backdrop to interpreting the relationship between inhumation and cremation, and the possibility that cremation was sometimes followed by the immersion of cremains in watery locations. This possibility is set within a wider context of pagan Slavic cosmology as revealed through material culture. The possibility of water burial operating alongside and integral to cremation practices is thus considered. Clear recommendations are made for future research.

Central Sweden

We next turn to Scandinavia, with Ljungkvist considering cremation in central Sweden, where burning the dead is a widespread practice from the Migration Period (fifth–early sixth centuries CE) through the Vendel Period (late sixth–late eighth centuries CE) to the Viking Age (late eighth–eleventh centuries CE). The socio-political and economic context of burial rites is revealed, including the shifting settlement patterns. The shared ideological context of death is indicated in which cremation is a key element. Ljungkvist tackles the specific significance of animal sacrifice as a component of cremation practices. The monumental mounds of the fifth/sixth centuries CE show cremation as an important dimension of elite funerary practices. Meanwhile, inhumation graves became more

Figure 0.4: Overview of the North Atlantic Archipelago (British Isles) and all referenced sites featuring in the articles by **Squires** (110. Sutton Hoo / Tranmer house 174. Alwalton 175. Asthall Barrow 176. Cleatham 177. Elsham 178. Folly Lane 179. Loveden Hill 180. Mucking 181. Newark 182. Prittlewell 183. Rayleigh 184. Sancton 185. Snape 186. Spong Hill), **Perry** (176. Cleatham 177. Elsham 179. Loveden Hill 180. Mucking 166. Spong Hill 181. Newark Millgate 183. Rayleigh 184. Sancton 187. Bagmoor 188. Fonaby 189. Illington 190. South Elkington) **Harland** (186. Spong Hill 191. Berinsfield) **Löffelman** (192. Heath Wood 193. Repton) **Gleeson** (194. Annaghilla 195. Ask 196. Castletown, Tara 197. Cloghermore Cave 198. Forteviot 199. Cross 200. Kiltullagh 201. Mullaghbane 202. Rath of the Synods at Tara 203. St Mary's Southampton 204. Stoneyford 205. Tech Cerpanus 206. Western Arran Islands / Dún Óengussa) **Maldonado** (193. Repton 198. Forteviot 207. Acharn 208. Addinston 209. Alnham 210. An Dunan 211. Ardnave, Islay 212. Balnuaran of Clava 213. Dunstaffnage 214. Easterton of Roseisle 215. Golspie, Sutherland 216. Hermisgarth 217. Hallow Hill, St Andrews 218. Ingleby 219. Knowes 220. Lundin Link 221. North Mains of Strathallan 222. Norton 223. Oxtro Broch 224. Phantassie 225. Rhiconich 226. Sanaig Mhór, Islay 227. Sollas 228. St Ninian's Isle 229. Stromness, Orkney 230. Tara 231. Tarland 232. Torbhlairen 233. Udal 234. Uyea 235. Waulkmill 236. Whithorn 237. Yarm) **Ó Ríagáin** (53. Oseberg 192. Heath Wood 200. Forteviot 207. Acharn 211. Ardnave 216. Hermisgarth 223. Oxtro Broch 226. Sanaig Mhór 228. St Ninian's Isle 229. Stromness 238. Baliscate on Mull 239. Cleigh 240. Cnoc nan Gall 241. Drumbuie 242. Dún Mòr Bhalla 243. Gokstad 244. Harray, Netlater 245. Kingscross 246. Knowe of Skea, Westray 247. Machrie Moor 248. Machrins 2a 249. Millhill, Lamlash 250. The Ward 251. Tormore 252. Tote 253. Vestfold 254. Windbreck, Sebay 255. Ytri-Neslönd, Mývatnssveit) and **Mason** (110. Sutton Hoo / Tranmer house 185. Snape 186. Spong Hill 256. Apple Down 257. West Stow). Mapped by James Dodd



prevalent in the Viking Age and dominated in specific districts, notably the island of Gotland: Ljungkvist also discusses elite burial grounds where inhumation might have been a strategy to articulate status and power.

Western Norway

Gardela's second article reviews cremation in the context of the mortuary practices of western Norway, focusing on the Viking Age. The poor documentation and lack of synthesis of burials, combined with the poor bone preservation, are addressed. This has affected the burial data at our disposal. Elaborate elite cremation burials are introduced and evaluated as part of the broader spectrum of mortuary practices operating in Viking Age Norway. Meanwhile, the possible use of water as a disposal environment is considered, especially in areas with restricted space for burial sites along fjords.

South-West Jutland

Focusing on the cremation burials from the emporium of Ribe dating to the eighth and early ninth centuries, Croix evaluates the nature of the evidence from a mixed-rite (bi-ritual) cemetery and the need for new methodologies to investigate cremated remains. The significance of the cemetery as a place in the context of long-distance trading emporia is considered, as well as the relationships between humans and animals in the mortuary process. Croix warns of the dangers of discussing past gender and status identities of a whole society based on the limited percentage of graves that contained objects that would tempt us to reflect on these themes. There is considerable potential for a broader synthesis of cremation practices across southern Scandinavia and considering North Sea connectivity in order to build on Croix's evaluations.

Northern Germany

One of the core areas of Iron Age cremation practices in North-West Europe is northern Germany. Here, many of the large cremating and mixed-rite cemeteries persist from the Roman Iron Age into the Migration Period, some developing onwards into the Merovingian period. In this context, Rose adopts a long-term and comparative perspective drawing upon her research on the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age cremation practices of the region and considers the implications of new approaches to this data for inheritance of these disposal methods during the mid-/late first millennium CE.

Friesland

Shifting to the northern Netherlands, Knol considers the connections with Anglo-Saxon England, northern Germany and southern Scandinavia in the inhumation and cremation burial data from modern-day Friesland. Knol argues against

the assumption that cremations represent ethnic, or even regionally bound, identities drawing on contextual analyses of Frisia's cemeteries. The coastal habitation of the Frisians in which cremation and inhumation practices were both utilised is presented, and the impact of Christianisation is considered. Burial methods and mortuary structures, such as ash stains, post structures and the possible practice of excarnation, are discussed.

Flanders

Our focus once again moves south-west along the North Sea coast of Continental North-West Europe, with Annaert presenting the Belgian context of cremation following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. Focusing on Flanders and the mixed-rite (bi-ritual) cemetery at Broechem, Antwerp, the significance of cremation is introduced, and the evidence for burial practices and associated mortuary structures is reviewed. Annaert presents cremation practices in a long-term perspective spanning the Neolithic all the way to the Early Middle Ages. The potential for greater experimental and osteoarchaeological, isotopic and genomic research is considered, as well as the powerful role cremains can play in public outreach.

South-West Germany

Our final chapter on Continental Europe pertains to South-West Germany. While inhumation burials dominated in southern Germany, there is a significant minority of cremation burials in Northern Bavaria amidst predominantly inhumation cemeteries. Masanz presents the evidence, explores their significance and context, critiques previous interpretations and identifies avenues for future research. He emphasises that cremation is a varied practice and that no one explanation can apply to all early medieval cremations.

Northern France

Brunet *et al.* tackle the rare but significant traces of cremation practices in early medieval cemeteries from northern France. They also present a possible instance of a Carolingian-period cremation which might relate to Viking activity. As with other contributions, the importance and need for more radiocarbon dating is recognised, as well as detailed analyses of the cremation practices identified.

South-East Britain: osteoarchaeology

We next present a quartet of chapters tackling the archaeology for cremation practices from south-east Britain in the Early Middle Ages. We begin with Kirsty Squires' evaluation of the pyre technologies, cremation processes and social identities of the dead from the Lincolnshire sites of Elsham and Cleatham. The discussion explores the relationships between humans and animals in cremation processes and the significance of cemeteries

as places of memory. Squires shows the clear potential for detailed combinations of osteoarchaeological and social analyses of early medieval cremation practices and hopeful future directions, including the application of aDNA analyses. She also reflects on the ethical issues regarding the handling of burnt and unburnt human remains.

South-East Britain: ceramics

Complementing Squires' contribution Perry also investigates the cemeteries of Elsham and Cleatham. He considers the information gleaned about cremation practices from the analysis of mortuary ceramics. His petrographic analysis goes into the pre-burial life of urns and sheds new light on the relationship between cremation, settlement and landscape. Perry's concept of catchment areas counters the idea that a cemetery was just meant for one settlement. This research identified the clear potential for more analyses of the material cultures associated with the early medieval cremated dead.

South-East Britain: migrations and ethnicity

Harland provides the third reflection on eastern England, focusing on the famous extensive excavations and analysis of Spong Hill, North Elmham, Norfolk. Harland presents a historiographical and theoretical critique of past work. He queries how we consider cremation in relation to 'Germanic' migrations and the construction of 'Anglo-Saxon' identities. Specifically, Harland questions the validity of ethnic-focused questions in relation to burial methods. As a historian, he argues against the idea that in order to explain archaeology, we have to import a set of historiographical assumptions based on an outdated reading of historical evidence. Harland warns of the dangers of investigating old questions with new methods. The discussion also tackles academic responsibilities and challenges when communicating these stories to the wider public beyond the academy, including via heritage sites and museums. Harland's review has wide implications for how we relate cremation practices to social structure and ethnic identities across early medieval Europe.

Viking-period England

The fourth study focused on south-east Britain is presented by Löffelmann, who has conducted stable isotope analysis of the Viking-period cremation burials at Heath Wood, Ingleby, Derbyshire, where both the people and animals were burned. Her work confirms the likely association with the 'Great Heathen Army' and identifies both people and animals cremated here derived from Scandinavia. Indeed, the relationships between people and animals are again a focus of sustained interest.

Ireland

Gleeson reviews new radiocarbon dating investigations which challenge romantic nationalist narratives that cremation was 'pagan'. Instead, the new data shows that cremation not only persisted but increased post-Christian conversion. Once more, the need for systematic radiocarbon dating of cremation burials is recommended. Gleeson emphasises that we should avoid falling into the trap of trying to find a coherent or singular origin story of cremation rites.

Northern Britain

Northern Britain is a zone where cremation is usually seen as 'intrusive', either labelled 'Anglo-Saxon' or 'Viking'. Maldonado queries these assumptions, considering the ideological significance of cremation and its likely under-representation in work to date. Together with Gleeson and Ó Ríagáin (the chapters preceding and following Maldonado's chapter), ethnic and cultural labelling of the early medieval cremated dead are countered and critiqued, and the supposed rarity of the burning of the dead in Northern Britain and Ireland is debunked.

The Western and Northern Isles

Complementing Maldonado's work, cremation practices from the western and northern isles are explored by Ó Ríagáin together with other sites in Atlantic northern Britain. The need for detailed methodologies and dating is also recognised, especially to overcome misidentifications. Ó Ríagáin also recognises the limitations regarding all cremation practices as necessarily 'intrusive' (i.e. 'Scandinavian' or 'Viking').

Scientific applications

The final two chapters tackle themes that span our study area. While scientific applications have been championed in many of the contributions thus far, we conclude with a pair of chapters dedicated to the investigation of cremation using a battery of techniques. As part of the ERC-funded, Belgium-focused CRUMBEL project, Veselka shows how radiocarbon dating and stable isotope analysis are together providing fresh insights into the early medieval cremated dead. Veselka highlights the need for close collaboration between specialists and those with a broader set of humanistic and social-scientific interests in the early medieval past.

Experimental archaeology

Mason considers the many interpretative benefits of exploring experimental pyre-building for interpreting the cremation of the early medieval dead. Focusing on early Anglo-Saxon England (fifth–early seventh centuries CE), Mason provides a host of fresh insights

and new queries regarding the performance and experience of open-air cremation, and the potential meanings such technologies might embody.

Principal themes and approaches

Having reviewed the contents of the book, we aim to distil some of the main themes explored.

As Neil Price cogently noted,

'burning the dead was not an easy task, to be attempted ad hoc by grieving relatives. It required specialist assistance, not only building the pyre of cross-laid logs and kindling in a manner that allowed for the best air circulation and consequent combustion, but also in keeping it going and adjusting the corpse alongside other things to be cremated' (Price 2020: 230).

Cremation was no single tradition in the Early Middle Ages: it constituted but one dimension of local, regional and supra-regional deathways operating across different locales and with varying degrees of expenditure, meanings and materials, as well as involved a complex range of resources, environments, practices and performances both before, during and after the burning of the cadaver(s) (Williams 2004; Wessman and Williams 2017).

Chapters of this book broadly echo this stance: that the contrast between inhumation and cremation has always played a role in the interpretation of cremation practices in the Early Middle Ages, but the two disposal methods must be considered *contextually* and *relationally* and both need to be seen as internally variable and in relation to other, less visible still, modes of disposal including the above-ground entombment and display of the dead as well as curation of the dead – fleshed, as bones either burnt or unburnt – beyond the grave. Still, while these themes have been discussed at length in relation to cremation practices (Williams 2002, 2014; Oestigaard 2013; Nugent 2017; Lippok 2020) they remain subjects of an active debate and the contributors to this book tackle this problem from a range of perspectives. Some emphasise cremation as a spectacle and performance as well as meaningful and significant in relation to cosmological, mythological and cultural dimensions of cremating traditions within and between localities and regions. Others have emphasised that cremation was a facet of mortuary variability without a singular inherent origin or meaning, but reflecting intersecting social, economic, political, religious and ethnic identities and influences. These are not oppositional approaches, but they do require careful balancing to avoid either (a) reductionist approaches to cremation as operating with singular cultural traditions and symbolic systems of meanings or else (b) tackling cremation as an arbitrary index of identities detached from intergenerational practices and traditions (Figure 0.5).

Our book emphasises data-driven, methodological and technologically refined and interdisciplinary approaches to these questions. Most authors integrate familiar and new evidence for cremation practices in their respective research areas in doing so. A common theme throughout is the visibility of cremation in the archaeological record. Cremations are often found higher up in the soil and are therefore impacted more severely by post-depositional occurrences such as truncation of the topsoil. Croix's discussion of the cremation graves at Ribe clearly illustrates this problem, as many of the features she discusses are only partially preserved. Equally, Knol's mysterious ash stains are also impacted by the poor preservation of some of these features on the Frisian terps. Masanz is adamant about the negative effect of poor preservation and excavators' biases towards early medieval cremations in Southern Germany. For western-Slavic cremations, Gardeła first warns of the ploughing out of cemeteries and also suggests the possibility of cremation deposits in water. For Norway, Gardeła considers the fact that most people might not have received a recognisable burial and the scattering and immersion of cremains in water might be a feature across early medieval Europe not readily apparent in our archaeological data. This possibility requires a different outlook and perhaps a different approach to documenting these watery sites. Wessman's Finnish CCULGs, as well as Masanz's Southern German cremation graves, draw attention to the possibility of only very small amounts of cremation remains being deposited, and the question of when something should be considered a grave. Similarly, Löffelman deals with the possibility of cenotaph graves with no, or only very little, cremains being deposited under Viking-age mounds in Heath Wood. The same applies to above-ground repositories for the cremated dead (Mason, this volume; Meyers Emery and Williams 2018). As Croix reflects regarding gender representation, the visibility of cremations has great consequences for our interpretative possibilities as we are basing our narrative on only part of the original evidence. As a result, the frequency and significance of cremation practices have, in some areas of North-West Europe, severely impacted their interpretation. Believed to be an infrequent, exceptional, type of burial, early medieval cremations were not afforded the attention they deserved in parts of our research area. A recent study (Brandsen and Lippok 2021) in the Netherlands has shown that our documentation methods contribute to the problem as singular occurrences of early medieval cremations often get lost in the enormous amounts of data from other time periods collected through commercial archaeology. The aforementioned failure to recognise cremation in early medieval Western Britain also needs to be critically re-evaluated drawing on these perspectives.

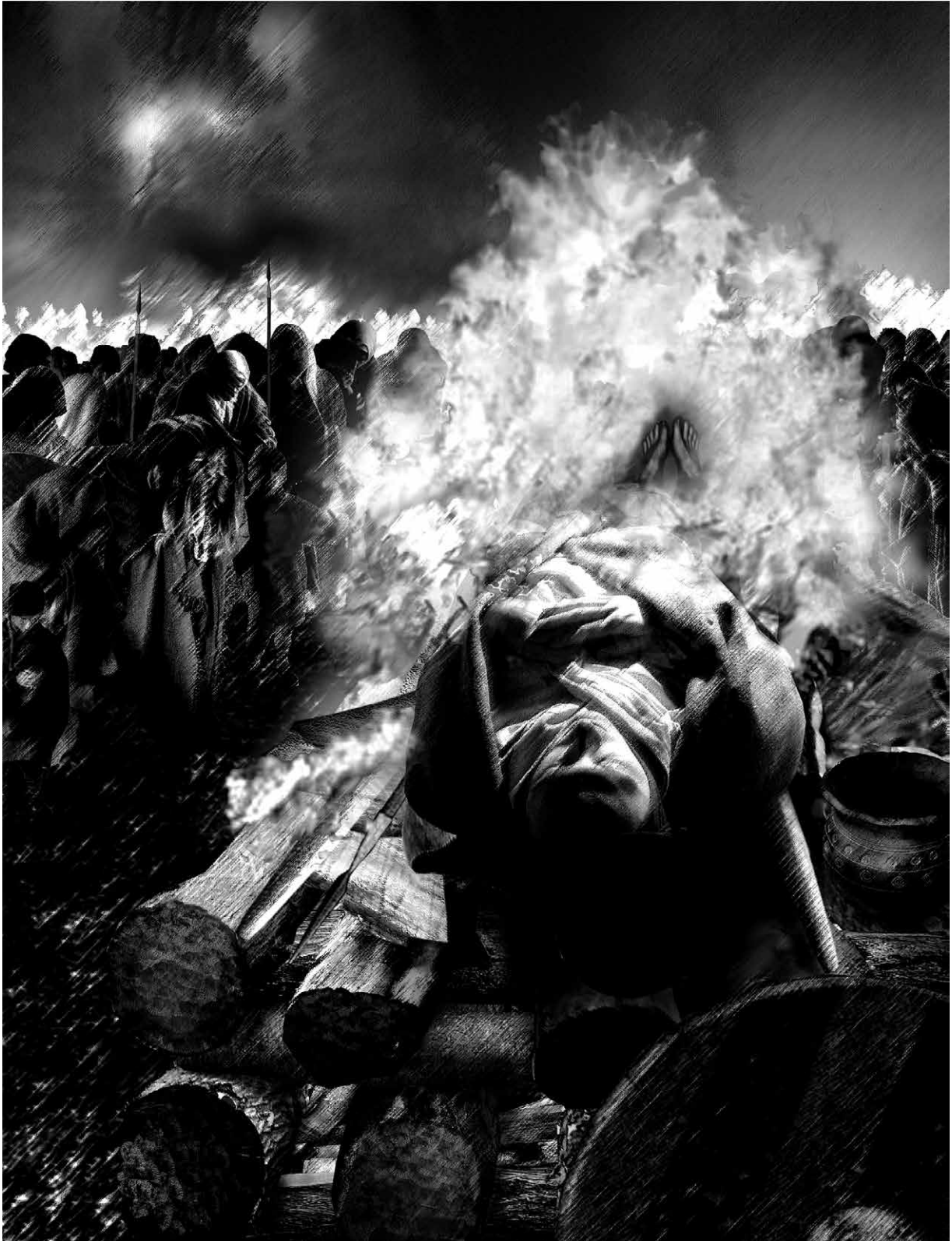


Figure 0.5: 'Burning the Body' by Aaron Watson: an impression of a nighttime early Anglo-Saxon cremation ceremony emphasising the spectacle and corporeal transformation involved in early medieval cremation practices (after Williams 2006a: 92, figure 3.1 and Williams 2007, 86, figure 20; see also Watson and Williams 2019: 122–124)

The problem of impaired visibility and, thus, the discovery and interpretation of cremation practices is also affected by the misdating of cremation graves. The advances and increased affordability of ^{14}C reveal a complex image regarding the chronology and disposal practices of cremated remains, with several contributions in this volume pointing towards the danger of misdating cremations. Wessman discusses the possibility of the long-term storage of cremation above ground, exemplified by thirteenth-century inhumations in Northern Finland containing cremation deposits that are 200 years older. Maldonado notes a similar example of Early Iron Age cremains being deposited in a cairn built in the first millennium CE. Also showing that the curation of bones was practised in various time periods and contexts, Veselka discusses the curation of Bronze Age cremated bones, where 100-year-old bones were deposited with a younger cremation. Also, Annaert, Ó Ríagáin and Maldonado point to specific instances of reuse of Bronze Age urns for early medieval cremains, possibly indicating a wider trend of re-use of ancient urns. Masanz and Gleeson supply specific examples of the surprising discovery of unfurnished early medieval cremains on prehistoric sites in the Main-region of Bavaria and at Castletown, Tara. Without ^{14}C data, these cremations would have been assumed to originate from before the Early Middle Ages. This exemplifies how our narratives about the past, mainly that early medieval cremation was not practised in certain areas, constrain our preconceptions and the histories we write about the early medieval past and its deathways. This connects to a further key theme: as all contributors demonstrate, we remain constricted by the limitations of documentation and methods of past generations of researchers. Yet there remains, as Gardela ably demonstrates for western Norway, considerable potential for fresh analyses of antiquarian and early archaeological research.

Our role is to challenge the narratives that simplify the past, especially now that we recognise, through increased data volume and international cooperation, that the archaeological record shows that variability in burial practices is the norm. That goes for the different burial forms like cremation, inhumation, and excarnation but also for variability within, for example, cremation rites. Annaert and Squires, in their contributions, reflect on the differences in pyre-technologies between Roman and early medieval cremation practices. Pyre-building technologies, the choice of fuel, positioning the corpse on the pyre, and the duration and method of extinguishing all may have varied greatly over Europe in the Early Middle Ages, as Squires, Veselka, and Mason contemplate. Multiple contributions identify the need for integrating osteological and scientific applications to help enrich and refine our understanding of who and why cremation was practised and how these practices spread, changed and declined.

The careful investigation of visibility, dating and mortuary variability presented in this book shows that mono-causal explanations for the occurrence of cremation are not the way to go. Local communities would have burned their dead in distinctive ways, and to expect there to be only one explanation for their choice to cremate some of their dead does not sit well with the variability the archaeological record shows. While themes of cosmology, personhood and social memory pervade the collection, several contributions acknowledge and warn of the trap of trying to find one coherent/singular explanation for cremation rites (Masanz; Gleeson). Such singular explanations are ultimately rooted in one-dimensional cultural-historic views of the past in which people behaved in ways that were restricted by their ethnicity, religion or other worldviews, an approach that early medieval archaeology still struggles to shake off in its scholarship and public engagements. The cultural turn has done much to critique and attempt to change these narratives, but our discipline is rooted in them, and long-established assumptions still persist (see Gleeson and Harland). Harland addresses this problem and contemplates where the tenacity of old narratives originates. He fears that there is still a long way to go if we truly want to rid ourselves of cultural-historically influenced narratives. While not explicitly discussed in every contribution to this book, we think it worthwhile pointing out the role we have in the debate around the misuse of archaeology by groups that would use history and archaeology to suit their agendas. Gardela very explicitly discusses the dangers of political manipulation of attempts to prove the presence of Vikings in Lutomiensk in his contribution about West-Slavic cremations. Gleeson's example of the importance of Christianity in the nationalistic narrative of Ireland, in turn, impacted the interpretation of cremations as 'pagan'. Similarly, Knol shows that Frisian's local identity and connection to their early medieval pasts was important until recently. In the same vein, Ljungkvist discusses seventeenth-century nationalism in Sweden and the importance of fantastical ancestry by way of scholars appointing archaeological features as the sites where the heroes of Old Norse sagas dwelled.

Future directions

In previous publications, Williams has already contributed to global perspectives on the future of the archaeology of cremation (Cerezo-Román and Williams 2014; Williams *et al.* 2017; see also Kuijt *et al.* 2014; Thompson 2015a; Williams 2015). But what of specific future directions for the early medieval archaeology of cremation as a reflection of this volume?

At one level, we would advocate, more of the same, work is required, building on reliable methods and techniques show-cased in this far-ranging collection (see also McKinley 2013, see also McKinley 2017). Still, there are additional facets that individual contributors address that

point to further under-investigated themes. These include the need to integrate archaeological science, experimental archaeology and mortuary archaeology (Mason, Perry, Squires, Veselka). Likewise, throughout the contributions, authors commented on the missed opportunities of experts working together in a purposeful way right from the start of researching and reporting on cremations instead of as an afterthought. Certainly, more dialogue with historians, anthropologists and sociologists could allow us to chart investigations into fresh questions about the cremated dead (Harland). Research must extend from the identification of social identity expression through mortuary practice to the creation of collective, individual and dividual identities (Wessman, Rose and Annaert), but also evaluations of human-animal relationships, elemental dynamics, and the biography of places in the mortuary construction of personhood and social memory (e.g. Croix, Löffelmann, Maldonado; see also Oestigaard 2015). There is also a stark need for analyses of cremation's 'genealogy' within particular localities and regions from the pre-Roman and the Roman Iron Age through into the later Iron Age/early medieval period (Annaert, Maldonado, Rose). Comparative studies with other parts of the globe and other times of the human past, from early prehistory to the contemporary, should also be encouraged to provide cross-fertilisation in terms of the theory, method and practice of the archaeology of cremation. While this book identifies clear cross-period dialogues with later prehistoric and Roman-period cremation practices for which a host of insightful work is ongoing exploring chronological and spatial trends (e.g. Ahrens 2015; Appleby 2013; Graham 2015), and other recent collections on cremation have already tackled comparative approaches through case studies (Kuijt *et al.* 2014; Schmidt and Symes 2015; Thompson 2015a; Cerezo-Román *et al.* 2017), in-depth dialogues should be further fostered and sustained. Moreover, this should extend not only into exploring cremation on a comparative scale for the human deep-time past from the Palaeolithic onwards, but also to incorporate and consider contemporary cremation practices (Williams *et al.* 2017). As well as greater dialogue across disciplines with historians, anthropologists, sociologists and others, which has received only occasional attention to date (see Downes 1999; Kaliff and Oestigaard 2008; Sprague 2005: 60–62, 137–139; Sørensen and Bill 2009; Oestigaard 2013; Williams 2016), there remain specific challenges and opportunities of drawing analogies from medieval literature and ethnographic sources (Høilund Nielsen 2009; see Harland and Ó Ríagáin).

The work of Perry reveals the vast potential for material culture analysis to reveal further details regarding cremation practices, as does the work of Squires and Veselka reveal the rich veins of bioarchaeological investigations as methods and techniques are refined and more broadly applied. In addition, there is a need to consider cremation

as a *rite de passage* and technology, its variability, traces of various stages and sequences of actions associated with its performance, and the various material and spatial contexts of its use (Duday 2009; McKinley 2013; Thompson 2015b; see also Cerezo-Román and Williams 2014). Multiple contributors identify the need to consider early medieval cremation practices in the context of multi-period investigations and the biographies of sites, monuments and landscapes (e.g. Wessman, Rose, Ó Ríagáin); specifically, in some early medieval contexts, did cremation serve to integrate the dead into the 'ancestral' or 'mythological' past (see Maldonado)?

As multiple contributors address (e.g. Harland, Mason), the role of cremation in heritage conservation, management and interpretation needs far more careful consideration (see Williams 2016b; Watson and Williams 2019). Broader still, early medieval cremation has a prominent position in contemporary popular culture, most markedly in the televisual and filmic representations of Viking cremation practices, which afford opportunities as much as dangers in engaging with early medieval mortuary data (Williams 2019). Indeed, as alluded to above, there are many benefits to considering early medieval cremation practices in relation to contemporary imaginings of past deathways and both representations and practices of dealing with and cremating the dead in recent times and today's world (Annaert; Cerezo-Román and Williams 2014: 251–254; Williams *et al.* 2017: 7–9).

Concluding remarks

All contributions to this volume reflect and stimulate future directions and themes through their variable methodological and thematic approaches to early medieval cremation practices. At the same time, they represent diverse perspectives on the perhaps seemingly self-evident practice of deploying fire to transform the dead. This introduction aims to collate and reflect on some of the themes in the volume and optimistically looks forward to all fresh ideas and opportunities for new research and collaboration regarding early medieval cremation practices for the future.

Acknowledgements

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Cremation in Finland

Anna Wessman

This chapter discusses the Cremation Cemeteries Under Level Ground (CCULG) in Finland during the early medieval period (in Finland referred to commonly as the 'Late Iron Age'). The chapter presents both the research history and present research concerning this specific burial form but also touches upon other burial forms in Finland. Individual burials are sometimes found within these cemeteries which are otherwise known to be collective. Variations within the mortuary practice are indeed common during this time in Scandinavia. Inhumation and cremation are practised simultaneously, sometimes even within the same cemetery. Although much is known about CCULGs there are still a lot of research questions to be answered concerning the ritual activities. Additionally, finding the pyre sites would be important for understanding this burial form better.

Cremation cemeteries under level ground; burial rituals; first millennium CE; site reuse; ancestors; inhumations; mortuary archaeology

Introduction

Femke Lippok: Could you introduce yourself and your work relating to early medieval cremation practices in the context of your other fields of enquiry?

Anna Wessman: I have two big passions: one is burials, and the other is public participation in the form of citizen science and digital humanities. The latter relates mostly to avocational metal detecting, which is a relatively new hobby in Finland. After I successfully defended my doctoral thesis in 2010, which focused on investigating cremation cemeteries (Wessman 2010), I have been mostly dealing with my public participation research. Also, I realised that the Finnish water burials in Ostrobothnia (a topic that was a component of my thesis) required further research, so I worked as a Principal Investigator (PI) on a project about the Levänluhta site (Wessman 2009b). This ended up being a substantial project (Wessman *et al.* 2018). Now, ten years later, we've secured over a million Euros for part 2 of that project. I'm not the PI anymore: the focus is on forensic medicine now, and we're looking at the skeletal remains for evidence of viruses. It has been a fully multi-disciplinary project. We extracted ancient DNA and isotope data, published in *Nature* in 2019, which we were very pleased with (Sikora *et al.* 2019). So, burials have always remained an element of my research, I'm still intrigued by mortuary practices, whether prehistoric or modern: the period doesn't matter.

Another aspect of my work after my thesis was contributing to a large book on Finnish prehistory and medieval times (Haggrén *et al.* 2015). Together with a colleague, I wrote a substantial chapter on the Iron Age (Raninen and Wessman 2015). Unfortunately, this is in Finnish only at present, but it was a seven-year long project



Figure 1.1: The cremation cemetery in Kalomäki in Hauho has been destroyed and bifurcated by a road (Photograph by Helena Ranta/Finnish Heritage Agency. CC BY 4.0)

culminating in an up-to-date publication on Finnish prehistory and medieval period for the wider public, which amounted to over 600 pages! As a result, I am very proud of the book and my contribution to it.

In the meantime, I worked on a book project exploring cremation across the human past (Cerezo-Román *et al.* 2017). In this edited collection, I developed ideas from my thesis in one of the chapters (Wessman and Williams 2017). So, my ideas about cremation are progressing slowly but balanced with a host of other projects and work. Yet, in my new appointment as the Professor of Iron Age Archaeology at the University of Bergen, I have returned to the Iron Age and to burials but on new topics and evidence. This new research focuses on western Norwegian data.

Key topics for studying cremation in early medieval Finland

FL: Which site in your research area featuring cremation burials deserves more attention, and why?

AW: Having given this question a lot of thought, I actually think that all sites containing cremation in Finland deserve more attention. Cremation is the most neglected burial form in Finnish archaeology, and at the same time, it is the dominant burial form during

the Late Iron Age/early medieval period in Finland.¹ I am very concerned about how cremations have been treated and excavated (Figure 1.1). Notably, not much has changed since my thesis (Wessman 2010). Cremation cemeteries are really extraordinary and cool places. The problem, I think, is that most cremation burial sites are only partly excavated. What we should do is excavate some sites completely with modern excavations techniques including a variety of scientific analyses. Smaller cemeteries are naturally faster to excavate, and thus more cost-efficient and you could get more information out of a smaller cemetery in a shorter time frame. These cemeteries can be huge: up to 2000–3000m², so it's not something you excavate in one summer. This is a dream I've had for fifteen–twenty years: to completely excavate a CCULG.

FL: As you say in your thesis, many of these CCULGs have been disturbed, is there any particular site that is relatively well preserved and suitable for the kind of complete excavation you dream about?

1 In Finnish chronology, the Late Iron Age (or the early medieval period which it is also called) spans the ninth and fourteenth century and includes the Viking Age and the Crusade Period (Moilanen 2021: 17–18 with references; Wessman and Raninen 2015: 216). Cremation ends already towards the middle of the twelfth century in South-West Finland, but it actually occurs also much later in other parts of the country (Wessman 2010).

Figure 1.2: The Stora näset cremation cemetery in Karjaa, Raasepori (Photograph by A. Wessman)



AW: Yes, we actually applied for funding for a site called Stora näset in Karjaa, Raasepori, Southern Finland (Figure 1.2). It's situated on a small moraine hill, beautifully located by a lake. It's very small and partly situated on top of bedrock, so there wouldn't be very thick layers. Sadly, we never got funding, but it's a site that invites investigation in the future. Unfortunately, due to the boom of metal-detecting in Finland,² it's now been partly destroyed by illicit nighthawking, so I'm not sure how much is left. But there are more hidden sites that would be perfect for excavation. My dream would be to excavate not only the cemetery site but also any associated pyre sites. We haven't found evidence of them burning the dead on the cemetery site. So, in order to get a more complete picture of the cremation process, the burial practice and the rites occurring before and after the cremation, finding evidence of other stages of the funerary process in the environs is a key priority for future research.

² Avocational metal-detecting started to become more popular in Finland around 2012 but grew into a real boom in 2014. During this time there were no actual guidelines for detectorists, so the activity was at times quite chaotic. Since then, the Finnish Heritage Agency has updated their regulations and written guidelines, also in English (see e.g. Wessman *et al.* 2016; Wessman and Oksanen 2022). Night-hawking is fortunately a quite rare phenomenon in Finland. A recent survey of damage caused to ancient monuments in fact highlights the forest industry as one of its main causes (Maaranen 2021: 23).

FL: How do we know that the pyres haven't been found at the CCLUGs?

AW: There is no evidence of pyres there. I wrote about Caroline Arcini's work (2005) on pyre sites in my thesis (Wessman 2010). She provides a comprehensive list of features that could be considered pyre sites. Specifically, what is missing from our cremation cemeteries are the bones: we don't have representative amounts of cremated bones in our depositions. Even on our largest sites, we have up to 50kg of bones, but compared to the rest of the grave-goods: that's not enough. So, we know that there is not an entire individual deposited. Other taphonomical processes could have an effect on the low frequency of cremated bone as well, but it seems like the cremains were transported from elsewhere, probably in urns. In some cases, we find some shattered ceramic vessels with concentrations of cremated bones around those sherds.

Further work is required to consider what features might be the remains of pyres, and how we can identify and understand them in the archaeological record. The challenge is to distinguish pyres from other activities such as craftworking and other kinds of fire rituals. It would be great to be able to focus on pyre-sites if we can find them.

FL: We've already gleaned that cremation has been neglected as a disposal practice in Finnish archaeology. Could you elaborate on that?

AW: They have definitely been neglected. Excavation techniques are often inadequate but also they are challenging to discern because we are often not dealing with discrete cremation graves: instead we are dealing with the collective nature of the deposits: loose scatterings of burnt bones. That makes a lot of archaeologists consider that careful measurements of the bones *in situ* is unnecessary. The assumption is that because the cremation is spread, you can't locate specific persons. So, when CCULGs have been excavated, it is often the incidental inhumation burial or weapon-associated cremation burial from the Merovingian period that are found on these sites that attracts all the attention and careful excavation. Moreover, the bone material is not often analysed after the excavations by an osteoarchaeologist, so we don't even know the ratio between human and animal bones! As a consequence, we know comparatively little about how people performed cremation funerals, why they cremated and what different processes a cremation rite included. Where were the pyre sites and what happened between the pyre site and the cremation cemeteries? Without proper documentation during the excavation, it is really difficult to answer these questions. Even though we have over 300 CCULGs in Finland, many of them are only partly excavated. As a result, we can't really go into these detailed questions because of how poorly the excavations were documented. This is our problem and the reason why I dream about excavating a completely new site to test what new information can be gained. There is so much we don't know yet!

Howard Williams: Can I just double check: there is no regional or national research framework into which questions raised by your thesis and your publication may be funnelled? Surely this issue needs to be factored into potential commercial and research archaeological work so that archaeologists will know what they should be looking for?

AW: No. To be honest, there have been hardly any excavations on CCULGs since my thesis was completed because of the economic situation: commercial excavations are not regularly taking place. I did think about writing a framework or wish-list for when excavating CCULG: these are the things you should look for when you excavate, a sort of 'lessons learned' piece. But after my thesis, I got swamped with a lot of other work. It is a good idea; it would be really useful.

FL: At least in the context of the Dutch national research agenda, early medieval cremations are not even mentioned, building on a tradition of complicated theories to justify that cremation burials discovered during commercial excavations were actually pre-Roman Iron Age or

Roman period in date. In that context, sadly, the research framework is making us interpret the burial in a certain way instead of the burial informing the framework.

HW: Likewise, even in southern and eastern England, where we do have early medieval cinerary urns, and they're well known, the assumption is that that's the only form cremation takes. Unurned cremations are, I suspect, strongly underrepresented because people are not looking for them. It's not something that's conceptualised as a cremation burial for the Early Middle Ages, and I suspect a lot of other early medieval cremation deposits are being missed or misattributed.

Cremation in context

FL: Why are some groups cremating and others inhuming their dead in Finland in the mid-/late first millennium CE?

AW: That is a really broad question. First, we have one area in Finland during the mid-first millennium CE, in western Finland, around a lake called Pyhäjärvi. There are some really striking early medieval inhumation burials in the Eura and Köyliö region. For example, the Luistari inhumation cemetery with its over one thousand burials is perhaps the most famous cemetery of all because it is fully published in English (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982a–c; 2000). This is a very specific area in Finland where inhumation occurred, whereas the rest of the country used cremation.

There are different theories as to why this situation existed. It's not to do with Christianisation but relates to an elite that had contact with Scandinavia and probably saw inhumation burials there (Lehtosalo-Hilander 2000). There are some older interpretations postulating that they are similar to the row-grave cemeteries of continental North West Europe (*Reihengräber*) and they could somehow be in contact with communities practising furnished inhumation burial, including weapon burial, of those areas (e.g. Cleve 1943). But probably it has to do with the fact that the inhumation burials we find were of people of higher status that wanted to identify themselves with the cultures in the West. They might have had some kind of alliance, or network, which was shown through this burial practice (e.g. Schauman-Lönnqvist 1999; Mägi 2017). Recently Ulla Moilanen (2021) pointed out in her PhD thesis that while cremation and inhumation were practised simultaneously, the motives behind these burials are diverse and difficult to interpret without further detailed studies. We touch upon this in a forthcoming article as well (Wessman and Moilanen in press).

In the late millennium, we get this slow Christianisation process in Finland. The first inhumations that were placed inside the cremation cemeteries are clearly a sign of this new faith or this new identity or a wish to be part of that. These first inhumations were still placed

Figure 1.3: Inhumation burial with a secondary cremation at the feet of the deceased, from the Tuukkala inhumation cemetery in Mikkeli during the excavations in 2009 (Photograph by Ville Rohiola/Finnish Heritage Agency. CC BY 4.0)



in the old cremation cemeteries, and they were selective: not everyone got an inhumation. One might see it as a statement: these are the first to get to be buried in this new way, but in order to ensure that they come to the right place after death, they are still buried in the collective burial ground where all their ancestors are buried (Wessman 2010).

Then we see, after the Christianisation process develops, the whole cemetery is moved, often closer to the first churches. Christianisation is a very slow process in Finland, compared to the other Scandinavian countries. In Finland, and you see this in some Baltic countries too, old practices, such as cremation, remained alongside new Christian ones (e.g. Hiekkanen 2010: 331–345; Laakso 2014; Puolakka 2019). The first inhumations have a focus on those in society with the power or status or contacts to long-distance trade so that they knew what was going on elsewhere. But they did it with a twist; they adapted from what they saw and did it in the old traditional way. For example, the first inhumations are still burials with grave goods, and they are placed right in the middle of their ancestors, in the cremation cemetery (Wessman 2010). But on the other hand, we also have inhumation cemeteries that also contain cremation burials (Puolakka and Kuusela 2023; Figure 1.3).

FL: This reminds me of the historical anecdote about the Frisian ruler of the late seventh/early eighth century, Redbad, and the story of how very hesitant he was to commit to Christianity when told by missionaries that Christian afterlife would not include his non-Christian ancestors (Nijdam and Knottnerus 2019: 90).

AW: Yes, that really pinpoints the idea, because clearly it was important that the first inhumations were placed on the ridges and hills with the ancestors. They emphasised that the Christian dead were still in the same community.

The cremation process

FL: What do we know about the cremation process and variability in CCLUGs? Do we have any theories about patterns of age, gender, social status or religious factors affecting who was cremated and deposited in CCULGs?

AW: This is a question we can't easily answer because the evidence we find is so diverse. Not everyone got buried with objects, not everyone even got a cremation during this time. Of those who were buried in the CCULG, they must represent only selected elements of society. You can clearly see that there are levels of wealth; some graves are wealthier than others. There is a mixture of everything. We have stone constructions, we have boat burials, burnt bones that are just scattered all over the cemetery, we have weapon burials buried in pits, we have inhumation burials: a whole range of everything, mixed together in a massive field of broken bones, stones and charcoal.

Given this variability, many archaeologists say that they are impossible to study. But when you go beyond that collectiveness and start to look at them in closer detail, you can see there are some patterns. The problem with CCULGs is that they are in use for such a long time so you really need to deconstruct the entire cemetery to understand the variations in them. One cemetery can be in use for a couple of hundred years up to 500 years. Very often, under the cremation cemetery, there is an older cremation cemetery. They are very often reused or in connection to older burial



Figure 1.4: The reused Bronze Age mound Alsätra in Karjaa, Raasepori (Photograph by A. Wessman)

sites. These might be for example, Bronze Age mounds (like in Alsätra in Karjaa, Southern Finland, Figure 1.4) or burial pits from the Early Iron Age (of the so-called Kärämäki-type). Furthermore, even later on, these cemeteries get reused because when cremating in the CCULGs ends, we see that the first inhumation burials are made into these cemeteries. As a result, these cemeteries are difficult to understand.

Another problem with the cremation cemeteries is that we have very few osteological analyses. So, we don't know who is buried there in terms of age and sex. Also, when it comes to the weapon burials from the sixth and seventh centuries, we can see that it's not male warriors buried there; there is a mix of bones in those pits (Wessman 2010). There might be taphonomic reasons for this, for example, the place of burning might have been reused, and the bones collected accidentally contained bones from a previous cremation. But it might also have to do with a warrior ideology about power in society. These burials, stereotypical 'masculine' might actually signify a family or somebody belonging to that group that was buried there.

FL: What about the 'gravklot' stone orbs, possibly marking female burials?

AW: That's something seen in Sweden. In Finland we only have two occurrences of stone orbs and they are from the Åland islands where the burial form consisted of burial mounds, comparable to the Scandinavian tradition (e.g. Kivikoski 1980: 10–11). Unfortunately, we don't have these

kinds of stone markers on the mainland. It would be interesting to compare the gender markings of these stones with an osteological analysis. They did that on Lovö near Stockholm and concluded that graves marked with a 'gravklot' stone orb were actually female-sexed burials and those with standing stones were male. They were of course single, urned burials (Petré 2011: 288–289, 327–328).

Identity and cremation

FL: I'd like to reflect on the gender aspects we've been discussing. Perhaps in Finland, because of the collective nature of the burial sites, it wasn't necessary to mark gender in the same way as elsewhere. Perhaps there was a different conceptualisation of personhood during life or after death?

AW: I know there are some archaeologists (e.g. Nallinmaa-Luoto 1978; Söyrinki-Harmo 1984; Heikkurinen-Montell 1996) who have tried to look at the scattered material on our cremation cemeteries, labelling artefacts and determining: this is a female brooch type, that is a male brooch type. They tried to look at patterns, but I think as an approach it is perhaps not very useful. Many Finnish archaeologists have tackled this topic and there are some Master's theses about it (Hietala 2003; Hymylä 2004; Pietikäinen 2006), even after I addressed the issue with some criticism in my PhD thesis (Rohiola 2013). I feel that trying to gender these mixed burials through artefacts is similar to looking at maps depicting stone structures; if you look at it long enough, you start seeing patterns and

Figure 1.5: Koskenhaka cremation cemetery (Photograph by Vesa Laulumaa/Finnish Heritage Agency. CC BY 4.0)



connections everywhere. Trying to create too much of a pattern from potentially messy and long-term processes is difficult.

We are trying to see order and structures, but the question is: how did people in the past perceive it? Perhaps, this was not an important issue for them. The collectiveness and the scattering had a different ideology. I discussed this with my colleague Sami Raninen. In our publication, we discussed that it was perhaps related to fertility ideas and scattering seeds into a field. Did it have something to do with life cycles and agriculture because it's clearly been strewn all over the place? Fragments of one object can be found 5–10m from each other. There is a clear and deliberate mixing of identities in death (Wickholm and Raninen 2006).

FL: And trying to get patterns from that might be projecting our own ideas of what humans are onto the past.

AW: Yes.

Monuments and landscape

FL: What is known about the significance of monumentality and the landscape context for CCULGs (including relationships with settlements and land-use)?

AW: Unfortunately, Finnish archaeology has traditionally been focused on investigating burials and not settlement sites. What we know of early medieval Finnish society is mostly based on cremations and inhumations, the information we have from the cemeteries. Pirkanmaa Provincial Museum has recently been excavating a large Viking Age settlement and possible outland trading post

called Tursiannotko close to Tampere in Southern Finland. This provides invaluable information about everyday life as well as long-distance trade (Raninen 2017: 21–23; Kumpulainen 2017: 192–196). Our view of early medieval times is rather distorted because we were focused on death and not life. Having said that, we know that CCULGs were collective places where you would bury the dead in an invisible way but in a monumental landscape: for example, the moraine hills or larger natural monuments in the landscape. From the settlement site, you would be able to see that place. And that place would be very important for people, they would gather on these cemeteries, also in-between funerals, people came to cemeteries to eat meals, they would have feasts there, probably with bonfires (Wessman 2010: 59, 93). We don't often know where the settlement sites were. Nowadays these areas are probably cultivated fields. So, what we find from settlement sites are usually clay-daub and pottery. During archaeological surveys, we can identify probable settlements and see that they were in close proximity to the burial sites. Thus, you could always see the cemetery from the settlement sites.

We also don't know what early medieval/Late Iron Age settlements from this time looked like or what the CCULGs looked like when in use for that matter. Nowadays, they are often in forested areas or have the appearances of small coppices amidst farmland (Figure 1.5). But what they looked like at the time of use is a very interesting question that I touched upon in my thesis (Wessman 2010: 76–77). They might have had fences, some kind of stone structures or building on top of the cemetery where you could perform rituals and have commemorative meals. There are often single post-holes in cemeteries, and the question



Figure 1.6: The cremation cemetery Kalmumäki in Uusikaupunki (Photograph by Teija Tiitinen/Finnish Heritage Agency. CC BY 4.0)



Figure 1.7: A typical Merovingian period weapon burial from Fastarby in Raasepori (Photograph by the Finnish Heritage Agency. CC BY 4.0)

is: were these posts marking specific burials or areas in the cemetery? Or are these posts part of buildings? That is something we need to look into further. It is clear, however, that there were structures on cemeteries and that those cemeteries were often located on natural monuments even though they have become hidden. The whole idea of CCULG is that they are invisible until excavated (Figure 1.6): you don't see them in today's landscape. No mounds were built on top, so we can ponder the question: was this a deliberate thing, did they want to hide their dead? But at the same time, they do it in a monumental location, and so stories and remembrance might have been fixed by these landmarks. This entire issue prompts exciting ways of thinking about the landscape context of death in Late Iron Age/early medieval Finland.

FL: You get the impression that they might incorporate the dead back into nature, linking back to the fertility ideas you already told us about.

AW: That's a good point I didn't mention before regarding religious worldviews. It's important to recognise that Finland was clearly a very different culture and society compared to the rest of Scandinavia in the mid-/late first millennium CE. There was a different language in the area of what is today Finland, the beliefs were different, and some were probably built upon shamanism. Clearly, it was not the Scandinavian (Old Norse) tradition. We had different pagan gods. A lot of the worship was focused on nature: the goddesses of the sky, the forest, the sea and water (Frog 2014: 449). Now we're talking about CCULG, and that concerns mostly Southern Finland. And Southern Finland was the permanently settled agricultural area of the time. But when you go beyond that area, you will have the vast boreal forests in the interior parts of Finland, not forgetting Northern Finland which was populated by mobile cultures such as the Sámi (Raninen and Wessman 2015). Hunting and fishing were still very much a part of the traditional practices in Southern Finland. So even though they were practising agriculture, including the ideologies towards those practices, there were still also beliefs and rituals connected to hunting. For example, bear hunt and the cult surrounding bears is something that probably dates from this period too (Kirkinen 2017; Piludu 2019). The religion and beliefs were probably very much connected to nature.

Material cultures and the cremated dead

FL: How do you interpret the relatively rare and selective provision of artefacts, specifically weapon deposits in CCULGs?

AW: During what we call the Merovingian period (sixth–ninth century CE) we encounter single burials in the CCULG, the so-called 'weapon burials' (Figure 1.7), which

clearly, as I said earlier, represent idealised martial identities. During the Merovingian period, we have a large number of weapons in our burials compared to earlier and later periods. This doesn't necessarily mean that the times were especially violent; it was perhaps more a tradition of exhibiting aspects of masculinity through weapon burials. During the Viking Age, we still have weapons, but they were clearly being treated differently. The single graves containing weapons disappear during the early Viking Age when we start to see weapons instead destroyed and scattered over the cemetery (Wickholm and Raninen 2006). So martial identities are still connected to the cemetery but not manifest in discrete graves. That is quite an interesting question: who received a collective burial, and who received an individuated burial deposit?

What's interesting to see is that sometimes during the Merovingian period, the shield-boss is used as a cremation urn. Of course, you could see it in a functional way: scooping up cremated remains with the shield boss, transporting them to the place of burial as, for example, in the Pukkila cemetery in Isokyrö and in the Vainionmäki cemetery in Laitila (Hackman 1938; Heikkurinen-Montell 1996: 94). But as we have seen from the few osteological analyses, it's not just one person deposited in these shield bosses. Perhaps this is more of a way to also consider the variety of what is an container and how they transported the dead, and where they would place the dead. It's a cool mode of deposition! Perhaps if you are buried inside a shield, then you are truly a 'warrior' in your identity or belonging to that martial ideology. It may have been the ultimate way of paying tribute to that ideology (Wessman 2010: 66–67). But we see this elsewhere too, so it's not entirely a Finnish phenomenon (e.g. Skogstrand 2016). Therefore, we haven't clearly given this practice sufficient attention and, to date, the functional considerations have been considered without taking the interpretation further.

FL: Are these complete shields or just the shield-bosses being deposited?

AW: They are burnt shield-bosses, meaning they probably accompanied the dead on the pyre. On the bottom of the shield boss, we often find the nails and handles from the shield. So, it was important to have a more-or-less complete shield in these depositions. Coming back to what is picked up from the pyre: sometimes you would actually pick the pieces from the shield out of the pyre remains. And although not all bones of the body are represented, there is a tendency to collect the skull bones. Was this just accidental because the bones of the skull are easy to recognise? Or does it have to do with the importance of burying the skull in the cemetery? The idea that people just picked up random bones and pieces of objects is probably inaccurate. I'm quite sure that there was a whole selection process of

what was allowed in the final deposition and what wasn't. But what happened to the bones that we don't find in the cemetery deposits? Were some bones taken back to the settlement, or were they buried elsewhere? There are a lot of possibilities there, and so much we don't know.

Cremation and conversion

FL: Is 'Christianisation' an effective explanation for the decline of cremation, and does cremation end with Christian conversion?

AW: The traditional argument is that Christianisation ends cremation. However, it's not so simple and the variations are considerable. If we look at cremation cemeteries in Finland and those in Northern Finland and Eastern Finland (now called Savo and Karelia), and on the other side of the border in Russia, we see that there is still a mix of cremation and inhumation during the medieval period. We even have inhumation graves containing cremation burials: cremations deposited on the knees of the inhumed person, and a different cremation deposition placed on the heart (see e.g. Fig. 1.3). So, these are individuals who were buried in very different ways inside the same burial pit. There is a doctoral researcher at the University of Oulu, Hanna-Leena Puolakka, who is doing research on these dual inhumation-cremations. I am very hopeful that she will get a clearer picture of these burials.

There are some examples from Northern Finland where inhumation burials date from the thirteenth century CE, with older cremations in the same pit. So, where have these cremations been for the intervening 200 years? Have they been somewhere else, or perhaps picked up from the cremation cemeteries? When we were talking about the first inhumation burials being placed on the cremation cemeteries, perhaps it holds true also the other way around? That when inhumation cemeteries were erected, you would then get some of your ancestors from the cremation cemeteries and bring them to the Christian sphere? But this is something we know very little about, they are mostly graves that were excavated a long time ago with poor documentation. Traditionally these really late cremations have gotten very little attention, if any. So, it's just like: 'it must be a pagan reaction to something, and then you focus back on the inhumations because they give more data' (see Wessman 2010). I'm grateful that the younger generation within mortuary archaeology is now looking into this (Puolakka 2020; Moilanen 2021; Puolakka and Kuusela 2023).

You can actually see that the church did not have much power in Finland during the Middle Ages. Especially in the peripheral areas of Northern Finland and Eastern Finland, the Novgorodian Greek Orthodox church didn't have much sway, and the people could be more flexible. Finland has always been situated between two churches, the Catholic

influenced from Sweden in the west, and the Novgorodian in the east, with probably very different outlooks on burial and resurrection (Hiekkanen 2010; Laakso 2014). When looking at cremation and inhumation, you really have to remember that. Perhaps the Orthodox church was more lenient towards cremation than the Catholic church. People had to come from far away to bury their dead at a church, and it isn't easy to bury people when the soil is frozen solid. People might have been buried in one place, and during the summer they would be reopening the graves and transporting them to the 'right' place as they did during historic times (see Väre and Ruohonen 2022). There is also a possibility that the church allowed Finns to bury their dead closer to the settlements in village cemeteries.

New approaches

FL: What new ideas are offering fresh avenues for the study of early medieval/Late Iron Age cremation practices and their relationship with other disposal methods?

AW: I'm very hopeful that Hanna-Leena Puolakka from Oulu University will come up with new ideas and continue the work I started years ago. We also need to study social networks and death rituals in a broader way, for instance, through kinship relationships, something that Dr Ulla Moilanen (2023) at the University of Turku has been looking into lately.

FL: To sum up, what new discoveries or excavation methods help to understand CCLUGs, especially since your thesis was published?

AW: We've covered this already above, but I would add that there hasn't been much in terms of methodology. As I said in my thesis, we need to work more multi-disciplinary. We need to work with osteoarchaeologists, we need to look at the taphonomy in order to understand the whole funeral process in its various stages. And I want to emphasise that it is really a process; there are, for example, a lot of secondary (later) practices in these cremation cemeteries that we'd like to pinpoint more explicitly. And more importantly, we need to date these burials more precisely through ¹⁴C dating to understand how these cemeteries developed through time.

FL: What about isotopic analysis, or does the dispersed nature of the cemeteries complicate this?

AW: It would probably be quite difficult, but we could start with the early weapon burials, which are often considered to be individual. Even though there are bones from different individuals, it would be great to see, for example, mobility patterns such as the local/non-local aspect (see Löffelmann, this volume).

FL: We know that dating cremation burials is hard in most cases due to their preservation. If you could send in one hundred samples for a free ^{14}C date, which site/graves would you spend it on?

AW: That's a dilemma! As mentioned earlier, many of the cemeteries are poorly documented, and we have to wonder if it's worthwhile to invest money and resources on radiocarbon dates without rigorous excavations to a high standard. Hence, we should focus our attention on excavating a site that has been left relatively untouched. Furthermore, with new technology, there is considerable potential for enhancing our understanding of early medieval cremation practices. For instance, there are some cemeteries where boat nails have been found. A cremation cemetery in Ostrobothnia (Pukkila in Isokyrö) is a fascinating material that I've been working on for years, and on its way to becoming published (Wessman *et al.* in press). When it was found at the beginning of the twentieth century, they had already built a house on top of the cemetery. The archaeologists had to excavate it through the frame of the house. They found this amazing boat burial with a Vendel-type sword, a staff, and a meat-fork; really the coolest place ever (concerning staffs, see chapter 4 by Gardela, in

this volume). And for my thesis, I had arranged for an osteoarchaeologist to conduct an osteological analysis of this burial and in the end, we learned that the Finnish Heritage Agency had probably misplaced or perhaps even thrown away some of the bones! What was left was 100g of bones, which she analysed, but unfortunately, that wasn't enough to give a reliable determination as to the age, sex or other characteristics of the individual to whom they belonged (Kivikero 2009). This is illustrative of the research history of cremations; cremated bones were just never seen as informative. Regardless, I still try to work on that material because of what an amazing site it is. It is a slow process, and with very restricted information, a very difficult process.

Conclusion

FL: Is there anything you would like to add to what we've talked about?

AW: I just hope it doesn't give too negative an impression about Finnish archaeology where research on the Stone Age and medieval settlements still dominate, and only recently has there been more interest in Burial Archaeology. However, the potential of CCULGs for future research is significant.

Key data: Finland

What are CCULG's? (a definition)?

Cremation Cemeteries Under Level Ground (or CCULG) are the dominant burial form in Finland during the Late Iron Age/early medieval period. The cemeteries are only weakly visible above ground, because they lack an outer/visible grave structure. The cremains are found in the stone structures which are below ground level with only occasional stones or erratic boulders apparent to the eye (Figures 1.1, 1.2, 1.4–1.6). This deliberate way of making the burials merge into the landscape is typical for CCULGs. They are also collective in their nature which means that it is difficult to define individual graves in the cemeteries. These cemeteries may also have been used for centuries by particular families or farms (Wessman 2010: 21–23; Wickholm 2008).

Where do (early medieval / Late Iron age) cremations occur in Finland and when do they date to?

In Finland, the first CCULGs develop during the beginning of the Merovingian period (550/600–800 CE) and they are frequently used throughout the Viking Age (800–1025/1050 CE) until the beginning of the Crusade period (c. 1025/1050–1100 CE) (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1984: 281–284; Wessman 2010). At the end of the Iron Age, mortuary practices gradually and slowly changed with

a shift from cremation to inhumation (Hiekkanen 2010; Wessman 2010). CCULGs occur in most parts of southern Finland, including southern Ostrobothnia in the north and Lake Ladoga in the east (Wessman 2010: 19–21). These are all areas considered permanently settled by sedentary agricultural communities (Wickholm 2008: 90).

In what quantities do cremations occur in your research area?

According to the Finnish Heritage Agency's web portal,³ there are currently around 250–350 CCULGs in Finland. The precise number is impossible to ascertain with certainty because these cemeteries are so difficult to define without careful and systematic excavation. Most potential CCULGs have received only superficial investigation (Wessman 2010: 57–67; Rohiola 2013: 26–28).

In what forms are cremations deposited in your research area? Are there any indications of pyres?

While most cremains seem to have been scattered, seemingly without pattern, individual weapon burials are known from

3 www.kyppi.fi

within CCLUGs, especially from the Merovingian period. These are mostly weapon burials consisting of shield bosses, spears and swords, which seem to emphasise particular male identities and their kin (Wickholm and Raninen 2006). Moreover, the majority of the weapons have been deliberately broken either before or after being placed on the pyre. The fragments of one single artefact can be found several metres from each other, but there may also be clusters of artefacts in the cemetery, suggesting single burials. Unfortunately, there is very little convincing evidence for pyre locations, but the pyre sites were probably either adjacent to the cemeteries or close by in the surrounding landscape (Wessman 2010). It seems that the pyre was constructed, the body lain upon it, sometimes wrapped in or lain on a bear or a seal skin together with artefacts, clothing, and ceramic vessels before the pyre was lit (Formisto 1996: 84; Purhonen 1996: 125; Hårding 2002: 217). After the burning of the body, the cremains were gathered into a container and transported to the burial site where they were scattered into a stone pavement. It is possible that the act of scattering the burnt bones was a metaphor for scattering grain into a field, thus relating to the agricultural cycle (Wickholm and Raninen 2006; Wessman 2010: 60).

What types of containers are associated (if any) with cremations?

There might have been containers for the cremains but also for the corpse before it was placed in the pyre. These might have been boats, sledges, biers or coffins that served as a part of the fuel for the pyre. But within the cemeteries, we also find traces (nails) from possible boxes or chests. Moreover, the cremains from the more-or-less individual weapon graves from the Merovingian period are often placed inside a pit which might indicate that they were gathered in a pouch or something similar, but there is no organic evidence of this. Burial urns are missing completely, but occasionally cremains are found inside the shield boss or a bronze cauldron which implies that there was alternative 'containers' as well (Salmo 1946; Wessman 2010: 55, 66).

Where osteological data is available, is there any apparent selection of deceased according to their sex or age?

We have very little information about the biological or social identities of those whose remains are scattered in CCULGs. This is simply because hardly any archaeo-osteological analyses of the bone material from CCULGs have been performed (Wessman 2010: 48). In the few studies conducted, it seems that the quantity of burnt bones in these burials is low, suggesting that the bones placed here may have had a merely symbolic role or that the bone material has been divided up somehow before burial. This might be explained by the fact that the pyres were situated somewhere else and not all bones were collected from the pyre. The pits often contain only 100–200g of burnt bones, but sometimes even less (Wessman 2010: 67).

When objects occur with cremations, what type of objects are they?

A CCULG typically consists of various weapons, jewellery and dress ornaments, such as bronze spirals from the aprons of the female dresses and bronze chains. In addition, tools such as knives, sickles, and axes as well as pottery are frequently found. The pottery, both fine and coarse ware, seems to be mostly from leftovers of commemorative activities at the site such as feasting but the fine ware is probably grave goods. (Wessman 2010: 45). Badly damaged and melted bronze artefacts, slag, burnt clay and clay daub are usually considered as mass finds and have thus not been documented in greater detail during excavations which is a pity because they seem to be significant to both the burial and the later commemorative rituals at the site (Haimila 2002; Pietikäinen 2006).

What relationship exists between inhumation burials and cremation burials in your research area? Do they occur on the same site, or even in the same grave context? Do they have similar items deposited with them?

At the end of the Viking Age and the beginning of the Crusade period, the first inhumations appear within CCULGs. They are often placed either at the outer limits or in the middle of the cemetery. Usually, there are only a few inhumations in each cemetery, even though some inhumation cemeteries are also known in the present-day surroundings of Turku and Tampere (Nallinmaa-Luoto 1978; Pietikäinen 2006; Wessman 2010: 27–28). Moreover, it seems that these inhumations were the last pagan burials performed at the site before the Christianisation process started. When inhumation became more common, the inhumation cemeteries moved to new locations, perhaps to the places where the first churches were built (Wessman 2010: 27; Hiekkänen 2010). Because the inhumations were dug through the older cremation layer, there might be artefacts inside the inhumation burials which are typologically older than the inhumation. These might have been picked up during or before the funeral and laid in the same burial pit or even inside the coffin. Before it was believed that this was accidental, but today's interpretation is that the act of placing older objects in the burials is indeed deliberate (Wessman 2010: 98–103, 114; Moilanen 2021: 69–78).

Are there funerary monuments or other structures surrounding cremations in your research area?

The lack of any surviving above-ground structures and the flatness of this cemetery type transform it into a near-invisible cemetery, even though only a few of these cemeteries are found on level ground. The CCULGs in South West Finland are often situated on prominent topographical places such as moraine hills, slopes and ridges (Wessman 2010: 23). In that way we might say that the CCULGs were indeed as prominent in the landscape

as stone cairns or grave mounds were (Wessman and Williams 2017). Because the CCULGs were often used over many centuries, they could incrementally become monumental in their magnitude. There are cemeteries that are between 1500–2500m² in size (Wessman 2010: 74). Hence, the hills themselves became natural monuments in the landscape. Although the Iron Age community buried their dead inconspicuously by scattering them into a stone pavement the place itself became a monument (Wessman and Williams 2017).

What trends can be observed regarding the occurrence of cremation burials throughout time in your research area?

What I find significant is that the CCULGs frequently reused earlier Bronze and Iron Age burial sites and monuments (Wessman 2009a; 2010: 40). This widespread reuse supports the idea that these cemeteries were places of both creating and maintaining social memory as well as ancestors' worship (Wessman 2009a; 2010). There are, for example, CCULGs that are erected on top of older cemeteries or settlement sites from the Roman Iron Age (1–400 CE) and the Migration period (400–550 CE) (Wessman 2010: 30, 94–107). There are even examples of cemeteries that are built on top of cairns from the Bronze Age or the Pre-Roman Iron Age (Pietikäinen 2006; Wessman 2010).

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Western Slavic Cremation Practices:

Past Work, Current Perspectives
and Future Directions

Leszek Gardela

This chapter investigates past and present perspectives on Western Slavic cremation practices in Poland. Beginning with an overview of some of the most important publications concerning the title theme, the discussion moves on to explore aspects of several graves from an early medieval cemetery at Lutomiersk. These finds form a backdrop for a wider debate on the diversity and meaning of cremation rituals in Poland and the wider Slavic world. Overall, cremation graves seem to be less frequently encountered in the Polish archaeological record than inhumations, but this may be due to issues of preservation and recording (especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) as well as the idea that Western Slavs scattered the cremated remains of their dead in the open fields or in water. The chapter ends with some suggestions for future fieldwork and a call for more open-minded and theoretically informed explorations of the meaning of Western Slavic mortuary practices.

Slavs, funerals, cremations, paganism, conversion, Lutomiersk, Ciepłe

Introduction

Howard Williams: Could you introduce yourself and your work relating to early medieval cremation practices in the context of your other fields of enquiry?

Leszek Gardela : I'm an expert in early medieval archaeology focusing on the Viking world. While I haven't worked on cremation graves specifically in my career, I've led a range of projects that address themes that relate to cremation practices in one way or another. My PhD project that I completed in 2012 at the University of Aberdeen focused on magic in the Viking Age and 'ritual specialist' graves (Gardela 2012). Many of these graves are found in Norway and Sweden, and what is interesting about them is that they are first characterised by the presence of so-called 'magic staffs', or iron rods (Gardela 2016a; Price 2019). In Norway, these are mostly from cremation graves (see Gardela, chapter 4 in this volume).

After these first interactions with material culture from cremation burials, a couple of my later projects linked to cremation repeatedly. In 2014 and 2018, I was employed as Assistant Professor at Rzeszów University, and I led a three-year Polish National

Science Centre project on atypical burials, primarily in the Western Slavic world situated in the broader context of tenth–thirteenth-century Europe. I was mainly interested in inhumation graves for that project since these are usually linked to deviant burial practices. Because the book emerging from this project, entitled *Bad Death in the Early Middle Ages: Atypical Burials from Poland in a Comparative Perspective* (Gardeła 2017), was published in English, and because I wanted to introduce the Western Slavic world to Anglophone readers, I had to learn and write a lot about cremation burials. I think the book now serves as a useful resource for scholars interested in early medieval mortuary practices in Central and Northern Europe, as well as introducing the difference between ‘standard’ burials and those that might be called ‘deviant’ or ‘atypical’.

Around the time I was writing the *Bad Death* book and extensively lecturing, I also taught courses about Slavic and Norse funerary practices. In 2014/2015, I got really interested in several cemeteries from Poland and Norway that have cremation graves. This interest developed further in 2018–2019 when I was working at the Universities of Bonn and Bergen on my DAAD PRIME/Marie Curie project on ‘Amazons of the North: Armed Females in Viking Archaeology and Old Norse Literature’. During my stay in Norway, I personally examined a range of cremation burials of presumed women accompanied by weapons. The results of these investigations have recently been presented in full in my monograph *Women and Weapons in the Viking World: Amazons of the North* (Gardeła 2021b). Between 2020 and 2023, I was working at the National Museum of Denmark on a project concerning magic in Viking Age Scandinavia. One of the core outputs was the first-ever comprehensive analysis of a lavish cremation grave from Gutdalen in Western Norway (Westlye *et al.* 2023). Currently, I am working on a new two-year project called ‘Slavs in the North: Foreign Elites in Viking Age Scandinavia’, which is funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation. High-status archaeological finds from cremation graves, especially those found in Poland, form an important part of this project.

Past work on Western Slavic cremation practices

Femke Lippok: How much attention is given to Western Slavic cremation practices, and what interpretations have been posed to explain them?

LG: Not enough, I believe. There are two major monographs that were published over the last 60 years or so. The first one was published in 1960 and is *Obrządek ciałopalny u plemion polskich i Słowian północno-zachodnich* (Eng. *Cremation Practices among Polish Tribes and North-Western Slavs*) by Józef Kostrzewski who was one of the

founding fathers of Polish archaeology. It is a very modest volume, only eighty pages long, and it is basically a catalogue of all the sites with cremation graves that were known to him at that time – mostly, in fact, from the area of present-day Germany. Already at that point, Kostrzewski realised that for some reason, even though the Slavs inhabited the region of Poland since the sixth century CE, cremation graves in this area were very difficult to track down in the archaeological record. So, while there were some that were known to him in Pomerania (currently in the north-west of Poland) and then some in the Baltic area of Germany (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern), everywhere else he could hardly identify any cremation graves.

This was framed as a ‘problem’ that his successor, Helena Zoll-Adamikowa, picked up on and in 1975–1979 published a two-volume monograph entitled *Wczesnośredniowieczne cmentarzyska ciałopalne Słowian na terenie Polski* (Eng. *Early Medieval Cremation Cemeteries of the Slavs in Poland*). Together with a series of articles on related themes (e.g. Zoll-Adamikowa 1976), this monograph is still the standard and most impressive work on the topic of Western Slavic cremation practices.

Zoll-Adamikowa was an archaeologist by profession, but in writing this book, she thoroughly investigated other sources, including folklore, ethnography and medieval texts from all over Europe, to provide context and hints as to what cremation meant to the early medieval Slavs (Gediga 2000). She confirms to some extent Kostrzewski’s observations, noting that in the basin of the Oder River – largely in the area that formed the later Piast state – there are almost no cremations. She suggests it is a ‘burial-free’ area in the sense that there are no archaeologically identifiable traces of cremations. She then goes on to speculate that maybe the bones were scattered in the fields or displayed on platforms or posts, and that’s why we cannot find them. She also, in a couple of sentences only, proposes that the Slavs perhaps scattered the bones of their dead in watery locations, which I find really interesting. I have a feeling that’s exactly what they did to deal with the cremains: depositing them in water, especially in lakes. I will return to this theme later below.

In Zoll-Adamikowa’s monograph there is also a comprehensive catalogue of sites with cremation burials, plans of the different graves and images of the various artefacts they held. Generally, I think it’s fair to say that these two books (i.e. by Kostrzewski and Zoll-Adamikowa) are the classics and this is where you start. Over the last fifteen years or so there have been some new discoveries of cremation cemeteries here and there, including cremation cemeteries in the so-called ‘burial-free’ area showing it is now not as ‘burial-free’ as previously thought (e.g. Czupryńska 2002; Gorczyca and Schellner 2012; Wrzesińska and Wrzesiński 2021). Still, cremations are clearly underrepresented in the period between the sixth

and tenth centuries, which begs the question: where are all the people? We have settlements, strongholds, and different kinds of Slavic stray finds, but the number of graves is surprisingly low.

Another noteworthy problem in Western Slavic archaeology, and Polish archaeology specifically, is that there is still the idea that cremation graves are 'pagan' and inhumation graves are 'Christian', which I totally disagree with as I think Christianity was rather superficial in these lands until at least the thirteenth century. In order to understand the early medieval Christianisation process in Poland – as well as the scholarly debates surrounding it – one should not only look at the archaeology and the textual sources but also the wider cultural, political, social, and other contexts in which different Polish scholars have been operating over the last eighty years or so. This will lead to the realisation that until relatively recently Poland was (and in some regards continues to be) a country where the Roman Catholic church and its ideology had a strong influence on many spheres of life (including academia), so of course some interpretations had to be stretched to fit a certain 'preferred historical narrative' as well as the very earliest possible date for the Christianisation of the whole state governed by the Piast dynasty (i.e. the first historically confirmed ruling dynasty).

Key sites

FL: Which site in the Western Slavic area featuring cremation burials deserves more attention, and why?

LG: I think the Lutomiersk cemetery in Central Poland is an absolutely fascinating place, but the history of its discovery is grim. The site was found by accident by physical labourers during the Second World War. The Nazis forced them from the ghetto in Łódź to demolish an old Jewish cemetery in the little town of Lutomiersk, to use gravestones for construction materials for a road. So, the Jewish labourers were not looking for archaeological finds but to obliterate an existing memorial site. As they worked, they came across an early medieval/Viking-period sword. The weapon represented type S in Jan Petersen's 1951 typology (dated between the late tenth and early eleventh centuries) and reminiscent of swords found in other parts of Europe, including Scandinavia. This captured the imagination of the Nazis since they realised the Jewish cemetery was built over an early medieval, tenth/eleventh-century, burial site. Shortly after this discovery, they launched a full-scale excavation campaign hoping to discover more Scandinavian-style artefacts in order to 'prove' a Viking presence in Central Poland and escalate the interpretation into claiming the lands as Germanic since time immemorial.

But to their disappointment, there were no further 'Viking' discoveries at Lutomiersk, and virtually

everything they found was diagnostically Slavic. Having uncovered approximately 15 graves, the Nazis soon abandoned the site and sent the artefacts to Poznań. There is hardly any documentation that survives from their dig, and Polish scholars writing after the war called the excavation 'sloppy', whether they said that because of their resentment towards Nazis or because that was the case (Nadolski 1959b: 9). After the war, a new excavation campaign in 1949 led by Polish archaeologists was launched with the goal to demonstrate the fallacies of German/Nazi research agendas and to excavate the site professionally and without unnecessary political bias (Jażdżewski 1951; 1952). Although Konrad Jażdżewski, the head of the excavation, was not really a medieval archaeologist but an expert on European prehistory (Blombergowa and Andrzejewski 2007), his work was fairly meticulous, and the documentation was of good standard (for preliminary reports from the excavation, see Jażdżewski 1951; 1952; for a full evaluation of the finds discovered at Lutomiersk, see Nadolski *et al.* 1959). Interestingly, Jażdżewski deliberately arranged his excavation season to coincide with Holger Arbman's visit – the renowned Swedish archaeologist who wrote up the Birka volumes (Arbman 1940; 1943)! By inviting a Scandinavian expert, Jażdżewski wanted to confirm his assumptions about the Slavic nature of the site. Arbman examined some of the discoveries first-hand, confirmed they were Slavic and made it very clear that there was nothing 'Viking' at Lutomiersk. It is noteworthy, however, that to him, some of the finds seemed to be linked to the east, to the Rus area.¹

What is now important is *what* they actually found. The excavations from 1949 as well as several later campaigns yielded approximately 130 graves (Figure 2.1), mostly inhumations but also over a dozen cremation burials (Jażdżewski 1951; Nadolski *et al.* 1959; for overviews in English, see Abramowicz 1962; Gardela 2017: 29–30, 61–63; 2018). This was immediately perceived as unusual because normally in the Western Slavic world you either have one or the other: inhumation or cremation. One does not usually encounter sites that combine these two different customs (but see, for instance, the cemeteries at Bilczew in Greater Poland, Cieple in Pomerania and Dziekanowice in Greater Poland – Gorczyca and Schellner 2012; Wadył 2019; Wrzesińska and Wrzesiński 2021), and yet here there were both! This was one of the reasons why Jażdżewski's successors thought

1 Arbman's visit to Lutomiersk is described in detail in the diaries of Andrzej Abramowicz who was one of the participants of the 1949 excavations – see Abramowicz 2010; see also Gardela 2019a for a wider debate on the socio-political context of the research at Lutomiersk.

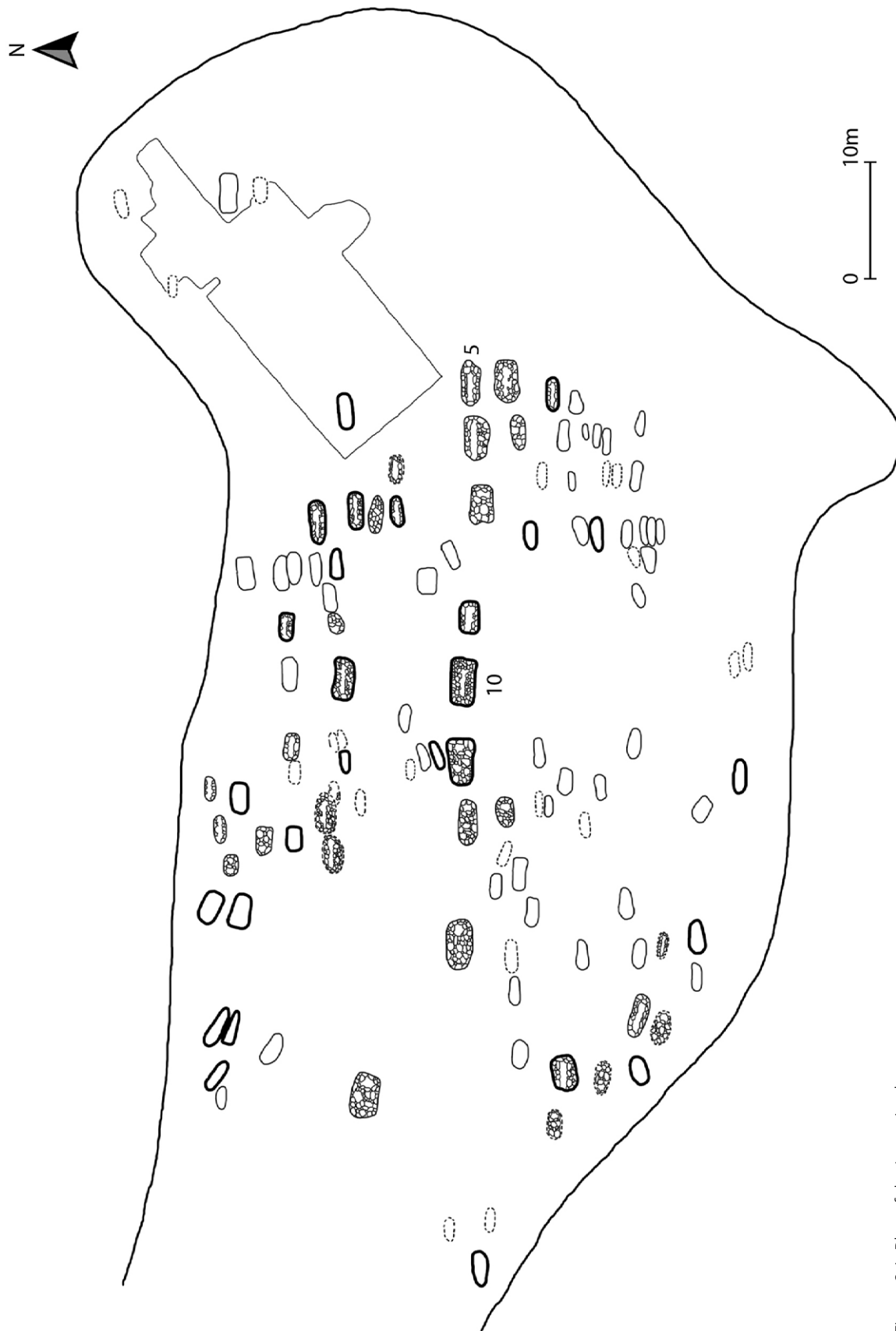


Figure 2.1: Plan of the Lutomiersk cemetery
(Illustration redrawn by L. Gardela after Nadolski
et al. 1959)

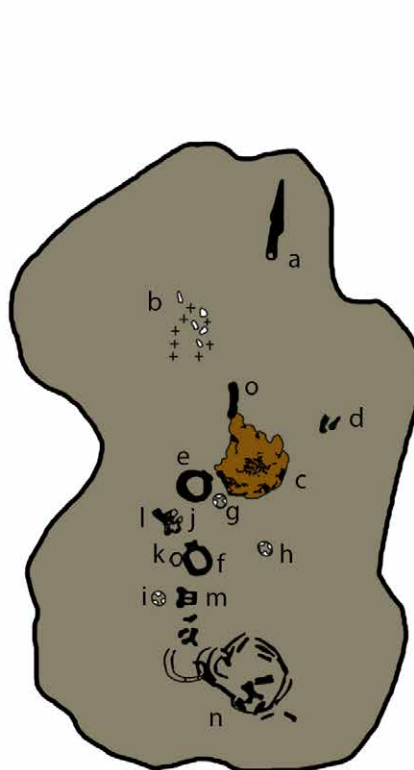
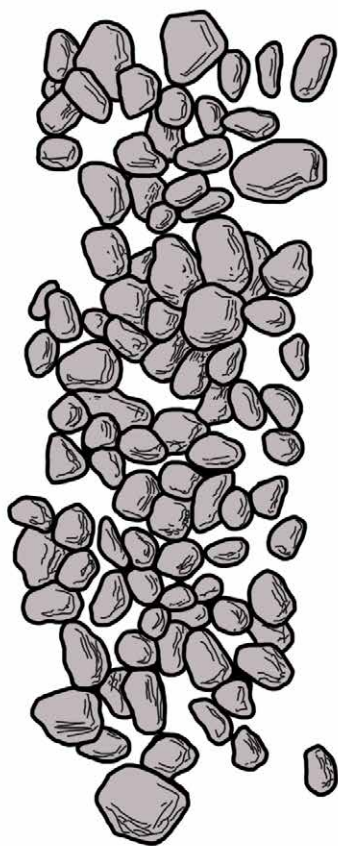


Figure 2.2: Plan of grave 5 from Lutomiersk: a – spearhead; b – burnt bone; c – presumed saddle and zoomorphic spurs; d – iron fragments; e-f – stirrups; g-j – strap distributors; k – horse bit fragment; l – iron fragment; m – iron buckle; n – bucket; o – iron fragment (Illustration redrawn by L. Gardela after Nadolski *et al.* 1959)



Figure 2.3: Plan of grave 10 from Lutomiersk: a – spearhead; b – human bone; c – presumed saddle and zoomorphic spurs; d – stirrups and other elements of riding equipment; e-f – fragments of two buckets (Illustration redrawn by L. Gardela after Nadolski *et al.* 1959)



Figure 2.4: Copper-alloy spur from Lutomiersk (Photograph courtesy of Muzeum Archeologiczne i Etnograficzne w Łodzi, image editing L. Gardela)

Figure 2.5: Artistic reconstruction of grave 10 from Lutomiersk (Illustration by Mirosław Kuźma. Copyright L. Gardela and Mirosław Kuźma)

the Lutomiersk cemetery was a burial site of foreigners as it was indeed out of the ordinary.

The two most astonishing graves in the cemetery are graves 5 and 10 (Figures 2.2–2.3). The former is a cremation grave (Zoll-Adamikowa 1975: 163–166; Gardela, Kajkowski and Ratajczyk 2019: 68–71). In the external layer, it had pebbles and stones. It is not entirely clear if the body was burned *in situ* or if the bones were transported from somewhere else and deposited. However, inside the grave, there was a patch of burnt bone mixed with different kinds of artefacts (showing signs of burning), including a spearhead with a silver-inlaid socket, an arrowhead, stirrups, a horse bit, an iron buckle, the remains of a bucket, two indeterminate iron items, a set of four identical copper-alloy strap distributors and two puzzling u-shaped items with animal decoration showing three quadrupeds on each of the arms (Figure 2.4). The u-shaped artefacts looked identical, but they were preserved in fragments. It seemed to the excavators that they were part of some larger item, but they could not quite figure out their function. Because everything in this grave looked so ‘strange’ and distinctive, they presumed it couldn’t be Western Slavic since, at the time, it was believed the Western Slavs did not have sophisticated zoomorphic art. In fact, Jażdżewski (1951: 119–120) even went so far as to suggest that the u-shaped items were imports from the Urals (Russia)! This claim was based on his impression that animal motifs depicted on items that stemmed from Perm on the upper Kama River (mid- and southern Urals) were similar to the decoration of the Lutomiersk finds.



In terms of its artefactual assemblage, grave 10 from Lutomiersk was very much alike grave 5, but it was an inhumation (Jażdżewski 1951: 96; Gardela, Kajkowski and Ratajczyk 2019: 72–76). Under a layer of stones and pebbles, the excavators found identical u-shaped items with animals as well as a spearhead and a lavish bridle with copper-alloy strap distributors and cheek-pieces. At the feet of the deceased (whose skeletal remains were decently preserved) lay the remains of two wooden

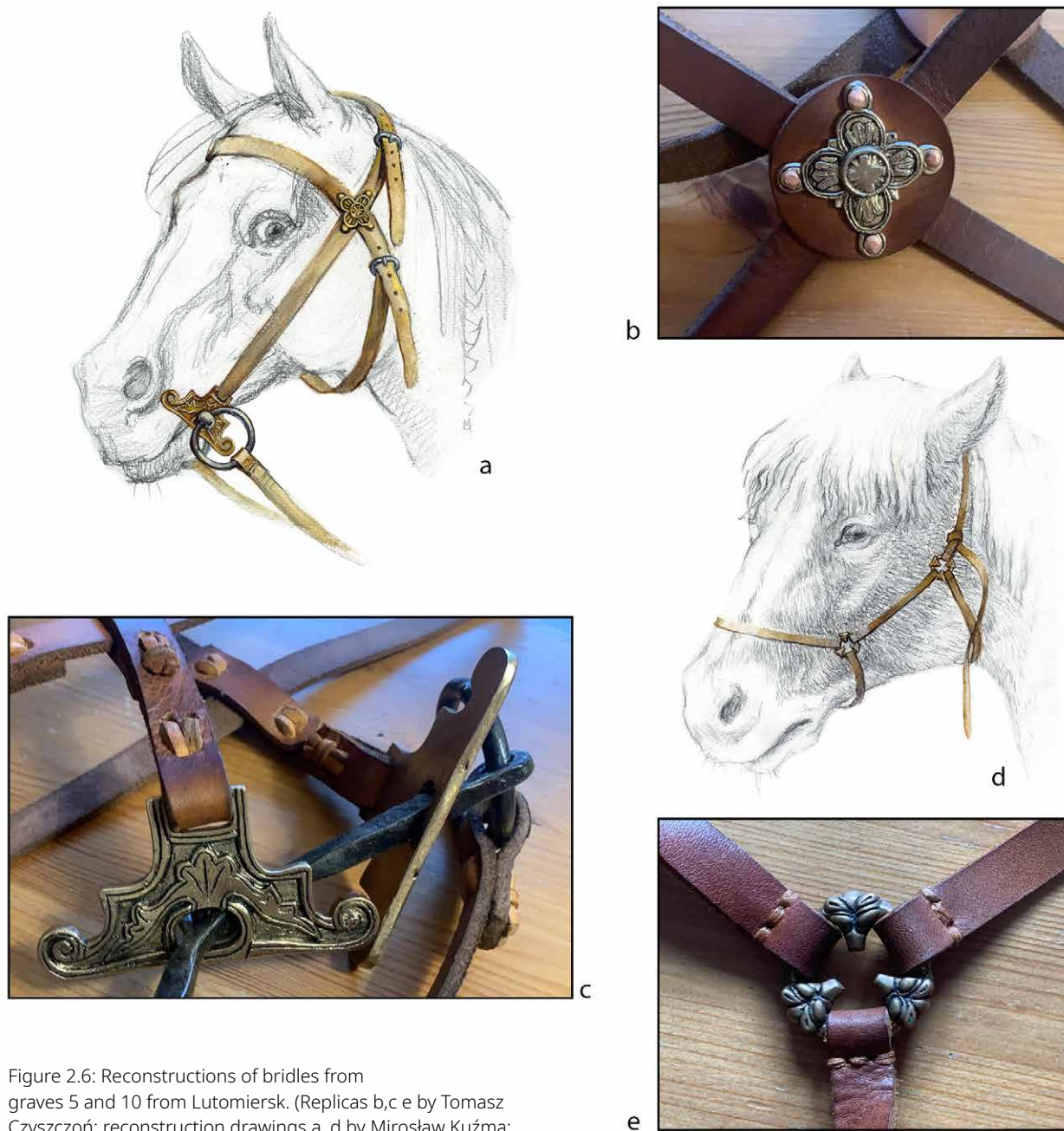


Figure 2.6: Reconstructions of bridles from graves 5 and 10 from Lutomiersk. (Replicas b,c,e by Tomasz Czysty; reconstruction drawings a, d by Mirosław Kuźma; photographs by L. Gardeła)

buckets and a set of stirrups. It is not unlikely, however, that originally the contents were much richer – ‘gaps’ in the stone layer suggest that the grave was reopened at some point in the past, perhaps even soon after the burial.

So, there was an interesting link between graves 5 and 10 – a cremation and an inhumation respectively. In the 1940–1950s, both graves seemed very distinctive from Western Slavic normative burial practices, so for the next fifty–sixty years they were considered as possibly belonging to Kievan Rus mercenaries (e.g. Abramowicz 1962: 130; Wołoszyn 2004; Kollinger 2012; Grygiel 2014) who came to the Piast state and served

in the retinues of Mieszko I (?–992) and Bolesław the Brave (967–1025).

The reconstruction drawing attached here illustrates how grave 10 may have looked at the time of burial, and the additional images show modern replicas of some of the goods that formed part of its assemblage (Figures 2.5–2.6).

You can immediately notice that the u-shaped items are in fact spurs. But due to their incompleteness in the graves at Lutomiersk, Jażdżewski (1951: 118–119) and some of his successors (e.g. Nadolski 1959a: 59; Abramowicz 1962: 127; Kostrzewski 1962: 221) believed they were used as decorative saddle bow fittings. The



Figure 2.7: Complete zoomorphic spurs from grave 42/2009 at Cieple and their modern replica (Photograph (a) courtesy of Zdzisława Ratajczyk and photograph (b) courtesy of Tomasz Czystosz/ Montanus Historical Jewellery)

reinterpretation of the u-shaped items was made possible sixty years later when in 2009 Zdzisława Ratajczyk from the Archaeological Museum in Gdańsk discovered a completely preserved set of identical items in an early medieval chamber grave (nr 42/2009) in the cemetery at Cieple in Pomerania (Ratajczyk 2013; see also Ratajczyk, Gardela and Kajkowski 2017; Gardela, Kajkowski and Ratajczyk 2019; Gardela, Kajkowski, Ratajczyk and Wadyl 2019; see Figure 2.7).

We know today that the spurs are as Western Slavic as they come in terms of ornamentation and design. We now call them 'zoomorphic spurs' (Ratajczyk *et al.* 2017; Gardela, Kajkowski and Ratajczyk 2019). There is a lot of detail, and I believe each spur might be a model of the pagan cosmos. While admittedly speculative, using folklore and other comparative material, it might be possible to decipher the significance of the depicted animals. On the goad is a back-turned horse, and then there are three quadrupeds each along the curved arms, probably cattle. At the terminals, there are snake heads. The wavy pattern under the animals represents water, and the copper-alloy bells suspended from the spurs still produce sound. What is really interesting is that the

buckle, the design of which is very unusual (in a sense, it resembles ninth-century specimens from Great Moravia – see Kouřil 2017: 335, 339, 340–341, 343, 346), lacks the tongue, and instead, there are bird-shaped fittings on the straps that hook the buckle and keep it in place. Two such fittings enabled the rider to adjust the size – perhaps to allow different seasonal footwear.

Grave 5 is not the only cremation burial to hold spurs like this. Another zoomorphic spur was discovered in the 1990s in Cerkiewnik in the Warmian-Masurian province in the north-east of Poland (Ziemlińska-Odoj 1992; Dąbrowska 2001; Gardela, Kajkowski and Ratajczyk 2019: 77–81). Unfortunately, in that case the site was only partially excavated and in a rather hasty way. The grave with the spur was a cremation grave which also held a number of clay vessels, some of which are strikingly similar to those from Lutomiersk (see a recent discussion of these similarities in Gardela *in press a*). The same grave also contained burnt horse bones (Ziemlińska-Odoj 1992: 122, 131). The presence of animal remains closely links to the details we know about Slavic cremations from written sources. For instance, a tenth-century Arabic account known as *Murudż ad-adhahab* written down by Abu'l-Hasan' Ali al-Mas'ūdi mentions that members of a certain Slavic tribe cremate their kings and chieftains together with their horses (Zoll-Adamikowa 1975: 284). Archaeological examples of Slavic burials with horse remains and/or equestrian equipment may thus have belonged to people representing the highest echelons of society (for new investigations concerning cremation burials with horses in the Western Slavic area, see Miechowicz 2023).

Zoomorphic spurs are some of the most beautiful Western Slavic objects from the late Viking Age and what's really interesting is that people are buried with these spurs in two different modes, cremation and inhumation. Furthermore, some of the features of those cremation graves are 'cited' in the inhumations (e.g. as regards the occurrence of similar 'sets' of weapons and/or riding equipment), so these are closely linked practices (on the notion of mortuary citation, see Williams 2016a; 2016b). I wonder if the inhumation graves with zoomorphic spurs are slightly younger and represent a transformation of older customs; in other words, the disposal methods in inhumation graves might perhaps reflect pagan and then later Christian environments in which they had to imitate the 'traditional elite burial' and translate it into a Christian-era inhumation burial.

That point aside, I'm generally very careful about ascribing identities in grave contexts and considering graves as 'mirrors of life' (cf. discussions in Williams 2006; Williams and Sayer 2009; Härke 2014; Gardela 2016b), but for objects of this quality and loaded with such rich symbolism it is acceptable to assume they *were* possessions of the dead person and were not something

that just randomly ended up in the grave. The zoomorphic spurs reflect some sort of mobile, rich group of people and are probably linked to the ruling elites of the time. I would even go so far as to say the individuals using them were members of the Piast retinue as the objects are the wealthiest martial equestrian display items one could have (Gardeła and Kajkowski 2021a; 2021b; 2023).

One of the reasons I got involved in research on Lutomiersk, Ciepłe, and similar sites is my lifelong interest in the Vikings in Poland and my urge to revise existing misconceptions about certain high-status finds – in other words, to ‘de-Vikingise’ them as that interpretation no longer fits (e.g. Gardeła 2014; 2015; 2016b; 2019a; 2019b; 2020b; 2021a; in press b).

Variability in cremating the dead

FL: Do you think cremation practices are regionally distinct?

LG: There is certainly variability across the broadly understood early medieval Slavic world. In many cases, the bones were simply scattered inside the grave-pit but the Slavs also buried their dead in a range of containers – organic and ceramic. One possible cremation cemetery at Jabłończ Wielki in Pomerania has mounds with small chests/chambers within them c. 1m x 1m under the mound, perhaps a container for the bones (Kajkowski and Szczepanik 2013). Sometimes the mounds are larger and can have inhumations built into them and combined with cremation burials. An interesting and in many ways exceptional cemetery which illustrates this was found at Orzeszkowo in Pomerania. It was excavated in 1921 and 1924 by Gerhard Bersu (a renowned archaeologist who found several ‘Viking’ graves on the Isle of Man) in a very systematic and professional way (see Łęga 1930: 607; Kostrzewski 1960: 39). The dead were buried under mounds with square-shaped chambers within, some containing inhumation graves, others cremation.

HW: The archaeological records seem to be indicating many sites comprised of either cremation or inhumation, but how rare is it to find mixed-rite (bi-ritual) cemeteries containing both disposal methods? Is that division something that helped perpetuate the perceived pagan/Christian dichotomy?

LG: I think so, yes. Mixed-rite cemeteries are relatively rarely encountered. Usually, Western Slavic cemeteries have either cremations or inhumations – until relatively recently scholars were keen to interpret the former as ‘pagan’ graves whereas the latter as ‘Christian’. In actuality, however, many inhumation graves contain ‘architectural’ and artefactual traits that strongly imply that the deceased and/or those who buried them adhered to pre-Christian worldviews regardless of the ongoing Christianisation processes. This is most vividly seen in chamber graves (which could be reopened

and accessed to allow close interaction with the deceased) as well as in the ‘animal style’ decoration of metal objects which depicts fantastic animals and symbols (e.g. swastikas) that are both stylistically and conceptually linked to pagan ideas. Due to the aforementioned socio-political and religious bias in Polish academia, former scholarship often failed to correctly situate these graves in their appropriate context. This is gradually changing however, also due to the fact that we are now finally coming to grips with the Western Slavic zoomorphic art/animal style (e.g. Gardeła 2022; in press c). Mixed-rite cemeteries such as Lutomiersk, which hold objects decorated in the animal style in both cremation and inhumation graves, are therefore crucial in building new and unbiased narratives about Western Slavic worldviews, material culture, and mortuary rituals both before and during the time of religious conversion.

FL: Do you also think that the earlier idea that we have separate cremation and inhumation cemeteries combined with imperfect excavation techniques led to the perpetuation of that idea? In other words, they weren’t spotting the cremation burials on inhumation sites and *vice versa*. Is that a possibility? Is it a real pattern or a created one due to excavation methods?

LG: I think that’s part of the problem, most definitely. The excavators in the 1940s–1990s were not prepared for the kind of sites that they were excavating. Either they did not have the skill, information or imagination to understand certain aspects of the burial evidence and to discern subtle traces. Lutomiersk is a good example once again because looking at, for instance, the inhumation burials, including the aforementioned grave 10 with the zoomorphic spurs, to me, it appears like a chamber-grave and it was probably a chamber-grave but because they did not know much about chamber-graves at that time they did not understand what they were excavating and did not document it properly.

Then, of course, Polish archaeology was very different from German or Scandinavian archaeology at that time, and the focus up to the 1990s was always on objects rather than burial contexts and the people from graves. So that’s really important to understand: they were looking for ferrous and non-ferrous items, they were not really concerned with bones, and they were not really interested in how things were placed within the burial space and the relationships between the finds and the dead. These factors limited the ability to interpret funerary practices, and indeed it still is a challenge. One further example of the problem with the cremation-inhumation dichotomy is the aforementioned site at Ciepłe in Pomerania, the cemetery that has helped explain what was going on at Lutomiersk. In addition to zoomorphic spurs, weapons and other elements of riding equipment, in grave 42/2009, next to the unburnt human skeletal remains, a heap of cremated animal bones was found (Zdzisława

Ratajczyk pers. comm. 2018). So, we have a mix of disposal methods together in the same context. The grave is so similar in its overall design to grave 10 from Lutomiersk that you could hazard a guess that maybe at Lutomiersk, there could have been cremated animal remains, too, but no one was expecting to find them since they couldn't even fathom the possibility that they were digging a chamber-grave!

FL: Are early medieval cremation burials shallow in the topsoil or at a similar level to inhumations: could that also be an issue of survival – being destroyed by ploughing, for example?

LG: With the exception of the famous Krak's mound in Kraków (Figure 2.8), we don't have the tradition of monumental burial mounds. Unlike in Scandinavia, where huge burial mounds over modest cremation patches are not uncommon, in the Western Slavic area and Poland, if there were any mounds at all, they were probably very small: perhaps c. 1–3m, usually round or oval and very occasionally quadrangular (cf. Kostrzewski 1960: 12–13). These Slavic graves,

however, could have stone packaging inside or additional stone 'wreaths' or 'fences' around them to mark them out in the landscape. As regards the aforementioned cemetery in Cerkiewnik, where one of the graves had a fragmented zoomorphic spur, in the introduction to the report, it says that the site was found by farmers who were ploughing, and they could see white powdery patches on their field and couldn't understand what was going on. That's because the graves were so shallow that they ploughed them out, basically.

FL: What is the role of chronology in this? Is there a secure idea of the dating of cremation graves, and is dating based on artefacts and/or radiocarbon dating?

LG: Zoll-Adamikowa (1975: 22; 1979) distinguishes several phases of cremation practices in early medieval Poland. The earliest phase is from the beginning of the sixth century to the seventh/eighth century, the second is from approximately the beginning of the seventh or mid-eighth century to the end of the tenth century and the third is from the end of the tenth century to the twelfth century. But it is overall very difficult



Figure 2.8: The Krak mound in Kraków, Poland (presumably an early medieval cremation grave) during excavations in 1934. (Photograph by Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe / National Digital Archive. Public domain)

to date those cremation graves, and this differentiates them from Viking Scandinavian cremation burials because Slavic cremations tend to be very poor in terms of metal objects and any artefacts at all. Usually, what you get is a clay pot only but rarely even metal objects. Sometimes we get a ‘temple ring’ – a typical Slavic head adornment (e.g. Musianowicz 1948–1949; Bukowski 1960; Kóčka-Krenz 1993) – and their dating is pretty solid so that the site chronology can be established in a reliable way. However, in other instances, you just get a spindle whorl, a knife or an arrowhead, and these can date to almost any Iron Age period. This is why the Lutomiensk burials are so interesting since they are more reliably dated because of the spurs, from c. 960–1030 by comparing with items from other well-dated contexts.

Cremation, Slavic paganism and Christian conversion

FL: Is the decline of cremation linked to Christian conversion?

LG: This goes back to the issue of ‘burial-free’ areas. While I cannot always prove it, I have a sense that they continued cremating their dead well into the ‘conversion period’ and into the times when Poland was officially Christian. However, maybe they deposited the dead and artefacts in water. One of the places that may support this theory is Ostrów Lednicki (Górecki 2001a; Górecki *et al.* 2016; Kurnatowska and Wyrwa 2016). It’s an island in Greater Poland which is strategically located between Poznań (which was one of the major strongholds of the emerging

Piast dynasty) and Gniezno (which in popular imagination is regarded as Poland’s ‘first capital’). If you are travelling between the two in the tenth century, you have to go by this place (Figure 2.9). The island was connected to the mainland by two bridges: one from Poznań and one from Gniezno (Kola and Wilke 2000; Kurnatowska 2000; Kola and Wilke 2014). It was one of the major strongholds of the time, probably of great strategic and symbolic importance, and this is indicated by not only the size of the stronghold but also by the fact that in the late tenth/early eleventh century, the Piasts raised a stone palace – one of the earliest examples of Christian/Western European architecture in Poland. When early medieval people built churches and palaces, they often situated them on old cult sites. Ostrów Lednicki was the biggest island in the area. This is the ‘Gamla Uppsala’ of the Piast state, I feel. What is special about it is that underwater excavations have revealed literally hundreds of weapons, including axes, spearheads, swords, a complete chainmail, a beautifully preserved nasal helmet, all kinds of domestic tools for textile production, and numerous pots too (Górecki 2001b). All this material was distributed all around the island but especially in the places where the bridges run. So, one idea – partly based on medieval textual sources – was that Ostrów Lednicki was attacked by a Czech prince Brzetysław who, in the first half of the eleventh century, invaded Poland and besieged some of the Piast strongholds. The presumed battle on the Ostrów Lednicki bridges and the lake is argued to explain the equipment’s presence in the water. If this were true, he would have besieged this stronghold in winter, meaning



Figure 2.9: The stronghold of Ostrów Lednicki (Photograph by L. Gardeła)



Figure 2.10: Ostrów Lednicki in winter. When the lake is frozen, it is possible to walk from the mainland shore to the island, as proven by an experiment conducted by Leszek Gardela in 2011 (Photograph by L. Gardela)

that, theoretically, they could have fought on the ice-frozen lake. As an archaeology student back in 2011, when the winters in Poland were really harsh, together with two other Viking re-enactors, we actually walked across that lake from the mainland to the island (Figure 2.10). It was totally irresponsible and dangerous, and I would never do it again, but I know you can do it! Of course, in the tenth or eleventh centuries, winters were even harsher, so it would have been possible to walk and fight on the lake. However, I don't quite believe this theory; the lake is relatively shallow, so I cannot see why these items could not be retrieved if lost. This points in a different direction and suggests we are dealing with ritual depositions, at least in part. Now, some other researchers have come to this conclusion, albeit only tentatively, that this could be an 'underwater cemetery' (for the latest summary of the different interpretations of Ostrów Lednicki deposits, see Klaudia Karpińska's MA Thesis: Karpińska 2016 summarised in Karpińska 2016–2017).

In this context, perhaps it would help to briefly outline aspects of the Slavic afterlife: the structure is similar to other Indo-European cultures. The Otherworld is separated from this (human) world by water (e.g. Kowalski 2002; Chudziak 2015; Piętkowski 2017; Kajkowski and Kuczkowski 2017; Kajkowski 2020). In folklore, there are stories of an island upon which cattle are grazing on a green meadow. In Slavic beliefs, 'otherworldly cattle' can be seen as 'avatars' of human souls. So, it seems like waterborne crossing to send the dead through water in cremation practices would make sense in the context of an island on a lake. Going back to the zoomorphic spurs, the quadrupeds on the spurs' arms are definitely cattle, and they are standing on a wavy line which might be representative of water. Now, the horse on the spur goad is depicted differently from the

other animals, and it is not standing on the wavy lines – this animal is, therefore, somewhere else, perhaps standing on the shore. One way of reading this imagery is that the horse is a psychopomp that carries the dead (across a river or lake), who become cattle in the afterlife. While admittedly speculative, I believe there are reasons to believe that there was a Slavic cremation water burial which served to send the dead to the afterlife via lakes and rivers.

Another line of evidence that supports this argument is the fact that Western Slavic cremation cemeteries are often located on the other side of rivers from settlement sites (Kotowicz 2007). So again, one can see a notion of spatial separation of the living and the dead where water serves as a kind of 'border' but also 'a channel of communication' between worlds. Thinking about funerary drama as embodiments of myths (e.g. Price 2010), it makes sense if people are utilising actual topography to articulate these ideas – they cross the river and enter the world of the dead.

HW: This does make us rethink our categorisation of watery deposits and our default presumption across time and space that these are not to do with the dead.

LG: Of course, there are plenty of reasons why you might deposit things in water and they need not be about afterlife journeys – there are so many alternative scenarios. However, what is interesting about the Slavic world is that there are *many* lakes that have these watery deposits; in other words, these are not just incidental finds (e.g. Chudziak, Kaźmierczak and Niegowski 2011; Chudziak, Kaźmierczak and Niegowski 2016). One of the most fascinating sites is Żółte in Western Pomerania which is informally called the 'island of holy horses' because there are horse skeletons

in the water surrounding this island – all articulated and not cremated (Chudziak and Kaźmierczak 2014). There certainly can be prosaic explanations for this (e.g. the horses drowning during a failed attempt to walk across a frozen lake, for instance), but I feel we must consider the possibility of horses as animals with psychopompic associations: riding (or indeed swimming) with the dead to the Otherworld. It is noteworthy in this context that from early medieval cemeteries in Poland, there are actually several documented examples of horse inhumations, with horses with chopped-off legs or hooves, but we don't quite understand why (e.g. Wrzesińska and Wrzesiński 2000; Osypińska and Osypiński 2012; see also Kajkowski 2016; 2018; Sikora 2023). If you wanted to retrieve horseshoes, you could do it without cutting off the legs. Perhaps it was because the horse wasn't intended to ride, but swim, to the Otherworld?

FL: This leads us to the direct question regarding how historical sources have played a role in interpreting cremation practices. Given that you are using a range of mythological texts, legendary and historical data, as well as folkloric evidence, what are the challenges and potentials of such approaches to archaeological inference?

LG: They do play a role. We have more textual sources about Slavic cremations than we have about inhumations (Zoll-Adamikowa 1975: 282–286). They are remarkably consistent in what they portray, but all are written by foreign observers: Greeks, Christian clergy from Germany and Bohemia, as well as Arab travellers. They are usually not first-hand eyewitness accounts, but they stem from the period between the sixth and twelfth centuries. What is interesting about them, however, is the motif that repeats in several different accounts that if a man dies, his woman accompanies him to his afterlife (Lewicki 1955; see also Gardela 2023). It might be just a literary topos, it needn't reflect reality, but the stories are that the woman agrees to join her husband by hanging herself or gets cremated with him on the pyre. So, there's this idea of ritual self-immolation or hanging. This is very interesting since the hanging theme relates to people being 'suspended between worlds'.

But even though we have these accounts, there is actually not a single case that confirms this in the cremation graves because – based on osteological data – they almost always appear to be of single individuals. Sometimes we seem to have multiple interments in the same mounds, but we don't know if they were contemporaneous. In inhumation graves, we do have male/female double burials, but when this occurs, it is very difficult to suggest that one or the other was ritually killed or sacrificed at the same time as the other (Gardela 2020a; 2023; Gardela and Kajkowski 2014).

One written source pertaining to Slavic cremations, known as *Vita Ottonis episcopi babenbergensis*, also mentions

the idea of placing or setting up sticks or poles on mounds (Zoll-Adamikowa 1975: 285). Interestingly, archaeological excavations have revealed traces of scattered bones within the upper layers of the mounds or on the surface level of cemeteries, suggesting that vessels with burnt human remains may indeed have stood on some kind of posts or platforms similar to those described in *Vita Ottonis*. This form of burial would explain why it is often so hard to track down physical remains of cremations in the so-called 'burial-less' areas of the Western Slavic world.

FL: Are there any remarkable explanations for the occurrence of early medieval cremations that you've come across? (accidents, diseases, or witches being burned etc).

LG: Cremations are generally gone by the end of the twelfth century, and we don't have any lingering traces of these practices. It appears that instead of cremating their dead, the Slavs would rather inhumate them in times of plague or violent catastrophes.

Future directions

FL: What new ideas are presenting fresh avenues/new methods and technical advances?

LG: Since Kostrzewski's and Zoll-Adamikowa's time, many new sites with cremation burials have been found across Poland and the wider Slavic world. Some of these sites have now been published to a very high standard, but we certainly need a new, fully revised and updated synthesis of Western Slavic cremation practices. A synthesis like this should, of course, draw on the (revised) material assembled by Kostrzewski, Zoll-Adamikowa and other specialists, but the analyses should employ more nuanced methodological and theoretical frameworks. Ideally, they should also address the now internationally widely debated notions of identity, personhood, object agency, material/mortuary citation, as well as the controversies surrounding the 'pagan-Christian dichotomy' etc. (e.g. Williams 2003; 2006; Fowler 2004; see also the various contributions in Cerezo-Román *et al.* 2017 as well as in Gardela *et al.* 2023). Furthermore, Western Slavic burials should be situated in a broad cross-cultural context of the circum-Baltic area, something that has never really been done in a systematic manner. I believe much can be learned by comparing them to cremations from Scandinavia and the Baltic states since Norse and Baltic pre-Christian worldviews and material expressions of belief were, in many regards, very similar. There is also a lot of potential in investigating the possibilities of applying modern bioarchaeological analyses as well as subjecting the surviving bone material to aDNA, and isotope studies. Collectively, these could perhaps provide more concrete and reliable information about the biological sex of the deceased, their physical appearance, origin, and family ties.

Key data and future work: Poland and environs

Where do cremations occur in your research area?

My research area roughly corresponds with the political borders of present-day Poland. In the early medieval period (c. sixth–thirteenth centuries), this area was dominated by Western Slavic settlement. Western Slavic cremations are found all around Poland, although in some areas (especially in the provinces of Western Pomerania and Greater Poland), they are relatively scarce.

In what quantities do cremations occur in your research area?

Early medieval cremation cemeteries in present-day Poland can comprise from just a few to over one hundred cremation graves. Most known cremation graves hold the remains of single individuals, but mounds with two or more cremation graves within have also been encountered in the archaeological record.

In what forms are cremations deposited in your research area? Are there any indications of pyres?

They come in a variety of forms. The three most distinctive forms of burial practised by the Western Slavs in Poland include: (1) scattering the cremated bones on the surface of the burial mound or flat grave field; (2) placing the cremated bones in organic or ceramic vessels in earthen pits or wooden or stone 'chambers'; (3) placing cremated bones in clay vessels and setting them up on vertically standing posts erected on top of burial mounds. Pyre remains have been encountered in some Western Slavic cemeteries in Poland, either as layers of charcoal mixed with unurned human osteological material or as charcoal fragments surrounding urned human osteological material.

What types of containers are associated with cremations? (e.g. urns, wooden containers, leather pouches?)

Mainly ceramic vessels. In some cases, we can speculate that the bones were placed in organic containers made of textile or leather, but these usually do not survive in the archaeological record.

When objects occur with cremations, what type of objects are they? (do they tend to be burnt or unburnt?)

In the majority of instances, Western Slavic cremations are poorly furnished. Among the scarcely found objects in cremations are iron knives, temple rings, spindle whorls, combs and other types of utensils. Several exceptional graves from Lutomiersk contained weapons and riding equipment, but overall the deposition of such high-status items in cremation graves is extremely rare in the Western Slavic world. Occasionally, burnt and unburnt animal bones (e.g.

horse, pig/boar, goat/sheep) are encountered in cremation graves, too (Kostrzewski 1960: 18–19).

Are there funerary monuments or other structures surrounding cremations in your research area?

Some cremation graves are surrounded by 'wreaths' of stones or wooden palisades. For instance, stone wreaths have been encountered in Orzeszkowo and Warchlino in Poland and in Chorin in Germany. Wooden palisades, on the other hand, have been noted in Wolin and Puszcza Białowieska in north-western and north-eastern Poland, respectively. In several Western Slavic cemeteries, burial mounds were surrounded by ditches (e.g. Bloaschütz, Götz, Orzeszkowo).

Is there any noteworthy spatial patterning of cremation burials on the sites they occur on?

Not really, although it is noteworthy that they are often located on the other side of rivers from settlement sites.

What trends can be observed regarding the occurrence of cremation burials throughout time in your research area?

The relatively small size of the mounds and very modest quantities of grave goods compared to the often-rich furnishings of cremation burials from Scandinavia and the Baltic area.

Where osteological data is available, is there any apparent selection of deceased according to their sex or age?

No.

What relationship existed between inhumation burials and cremation burials in your research area? Do they occur on the same site, or even in the same grave context?

In early medieval Poland, cremations are rarely encountered within cemeteries with inhumation graves and *vice versa*. The cemetery at Orzeszkowo held mounds with both inhumation and cremation burials, but this is generally a very rare occurrence. Some inhumation graves held cremated bones of animals (e.g. Cieple), but these are all very exceptional cases and should not be regarded as 'the norm'.

Which site in your research area featuring cremation burials deserves more attention, and why?

The aforementioned cemetery of Lutomiersk in Central Poland certainly deserves more attention. It was excavated in the 1940–1950s, and the results were subsequently published in a series of reports and a multi-authored volume. Over the years, the site attracted a lot of scholarly attention, but the somewhat unusual nature of the grave-forms and

contents also led to numerous misconceptions. Some of these interpretational problems have now been solved (as discussed above), but there is an urgent need to re-publish the cemetery in its entirety using more sophisticated methods of analysis than those available to scholars in the 1950s. The finds from Lutomiersk are currently kept in the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography in Łódź (Muzeum Archeologiczno-Etnograficzne w Łodzi) as well as in the Museum of the Beginnings of the Polish State in Gniezno (Muzeum Początków Państwa Polskiego w Gnieźnie). In my opinion, a 'Lutomiersk revisited' research project conducted in close collaboration with these institutions could substantially enhance our understanding of cremation practices in the Western Slavic area as well as cast new light on the material culture, identity and provenance of the people who lived in the Piast state (and beyond) in the tenth–eleventh centuries. Some initial steps towards a better understanding of this important cemetery will be taken in the course of my current 'Slavs in the North' project.

Another site worthy of attention is a ninth–tenth-century cemetery with mainly cremation graves from Świelubie in Pomerania. Around one hundred burial mounds were recorded there during several excavation campaigns in the 1960s, but only a small selection of them has been excavated and published (Łosiński 1966; 1968; 1972; 1979; see also Gardęła 2019a; in press b). Several graves from Świelubie held diagnostically Scandinavian Viking Age jewellery (e.g. oval brooches), suggesting that the deceased may have come from Northern Europe. Interestingly, the graves at Świelubie also contained evidently Slavic pottery, which implies that the Scandinavian migrants maintained some form of close interactions with the autochthonous Slavic population (e.g. trade, exchange, marriages, political alliances etc.). New excavations at Świelubie would certainly provide further valuable hints concerning the Scandinavian community that presumably formed a small diaspora on the southern side of the Baltic and would shed new light on the multifaceted interactions between the Norse and Slavic population in the early Viking Age.

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Cremations in Central Sweden during the Vendel and Viking Periods

John Ljungkvist

This interview-based article revolves around primarily cremation burial practices in central Sweden during the Late Iron Age, i.e. primarily the Vendel and Viking periods (c. 550–1100 CE). This is a period where the burial practice changed profoundly after a transition in the decades around the middle of the sixth century. Cremation burials from this period are important to highlight, not least as they constitute 95–99% of the burials during most of this period. But they are underrepresented as a disproportionate amount of the research and popular presentation of the burials are focused on a few inhumation burials of elite status, far from representative of the societies in these areas of Sweden. This article covers a broad spectrum of topics from burial landscapes to the position of cremation burials in relation other burial forms and the characteristic traits of the period in question.

TBC Burials, cremations, late Iron Age, Viking Age, Vendel period, early medieval burials.

Introduction

Femke Lippok: Could you introduce yourself and your work relating to Late Iron Age/early medieval cremation burials?

John Ljungkvist: I'm a researcher at the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History at Uppsala University. I've been interested in graves from the Late Iron Age since the mid-1990s. I wrote my PhD about elite structures and elite milieus – how to interpret elites – in middle Sweden, published in 2006. The core base for that thesis was burial data. Since, I've often worked as a finds specialist on various occasions and I've worked with a lot of burial sites. Especially in more recent years, partly some of the studies are related to certain materials found in burials, including gaming pieces and bear claws. I've also worked on specific burial grounds, including Valsgärde and the mounds of Gamla Uppsala, as well as early Christian burials – looking at the Christianisation phase. So, my work has touched on mortuary practices in multiple regards (Ljungkvist 2006; 2008a, 2008b, 2015, Lindholm and Ljungkvist 2016; Hedenstierna-Jonson and Ljungkvist 2021).

Background: continuity and change in the later Iron Age

FL: Can you describe what the burial landscape looked like in Vendel and Viking-period Sweden? What do cemeteries look like, how large are they, and where are they located?

JL: If we take the burial grounds in Sweden, it varies depending on the region – Sweden is geographically a large country. It depends on which area we are talking about. For example, in Gotland, the burial grounds are related to very large villages and they can extend for kilometres with a mix of Early Iron Age to Viking Age graves distributed over large areas – hundreds of graves. In middle Sweden and some other landscapes, they tend to be smaller and more distributed. Many of them are related very closely to the size of the smaller villages where burial grounds from the Late Iron Age are often not located at the same places as in the earliest Iron Age burial grounds (Göthberg 2000). There is in most cases a long continuity at these sites. So, they are often located immediately adjacent to the settlements: there is a persistent pattern of this. There is no major division between the areas of the living and those zones set aside for the dead. Yet there are other placements of burial grounds. Some cemeteries seem to be placed on the margins of a village or farm territory. Others are located by fording places, or along roads or waterways. These different burial locations must have served contrasting purposes. Many of them tend to have quite a long continuity too.

We have a shift in burial location in the sixth century CE through to the early seventh century CE, and then after that relocation process, we have quite a long continuity from the seventh century well into the tenth century and sometimes even continuing to the twelfth century. Therefore, the Christianisation process for burial does not take place at the moment of formal Christian conversion – the formation of the parochial system isn't set up until the twelfth century when we see church foundation and burial moved to these churches. In middle Sweden, Gotland and elsewhere, there is therefore a long transition towards this formal Christian churchyard burial, with cremation practices being gradually replaced by inhumation but burial continues at the traditional burial sites – there is a continuity of place for burial.

FL: Do you have the same settlement continuity?

JL: Yes, that is correlated, so there is a tendency for the Early Iron Age settlements to be relatively transient – they move around more down the centuries than in the later periods. There was a tendency in the later Iron Age to more established and static farm locations from the sixth or seventh century onwards. Where you have a Viking Age farm, you regularly have a Vendel-period farm under-

neath or adjacent to it. In this way, the continuity of burial grounds comes to align with the continuity of settlement locations.

FL: Elsewhere, early medieval cemeteries are returning to Bronze Age mounds to bury their dead when there are no Iron Age/Roman Iron Age burials? Is that a practice found in central Sweden?

JL: There is a major difference between southern Scandinavia more broadly, southern Sweden specifically, and middle Sweden. In southern Sweden you have the Neolithic megalithic monuments and Bronze Age funerary landscapes still surviving and there we have evidence of later Iron Age burials associated with them – attracted to the monuments in the landscape. However, in middle Sweden, we do not have this phenomenon because of the changes in sea level caused by eustatic sea level changes following the release of the land from the pressure of the ice in the last Ice Age. So, you have a more evolving landscape since only a fraction of the land was above sea level in the Bronze Age, and there are fewer monuments dating to this period. As people move to the more fertile soils, they are not living close to the few Bronze Age monuments as they work the clay rather than the moraine soils. So, we can definitely find instances of reuse or integration of Bronze Age monuments with later burial grounds, such as at the Håga mound just outside Uppsala (Zachrisson *et al.* 2022). But that is one of very few we have in middle Sweden. Instead, the pattern is of creating a new tradition of remembrance, fashioning social memory through fresh monument building. Notably, this applies to the great mounds found at Gamla Uppsala. These vast burial mounds are new fixed points for memory creation and cemeteries accrue in response to them. If an older monument could serve as a foundation for a new or enlarged monument, they had no problem enlarging or reusing it.

FL: Are those cemeteries representative of the number of people living in Sweden at the time? Does everyone receive a burial in these cemeteries, or only a portion of the inhabitants? And could we be missing many burials because of post-excavational processes?

JL: There are major differences between the earlier Iron Age and the later Iron Age/Early Middle Ages because there seems to be a tendency for the burial to become more individual. Burial in the Roman Iron Age has a more 'collective' feel with secondary burials in major stone settings. When you move to the later Iron Age you have one individual cremated at one place, and then you build the monument over that place, whether it is a thin layer of clay or a mound or some other feature.

But, are we missing graves? Yes, we are missing infants especially – they are always highly underrepresented. In the 1970s, they made population calculations based on the size of the burial grounds, and we have many more later Iron Age burials than earlier Iron Age graves. So, it could be argued that there was population growth. However, from the settlement data, we know there were just as many earlier Iron Age dwellings as later Iron Age habitations and so it is unlikely the shift in burial numbers is related to a growth in population.

Sweden, middle Sweden and Gotland are famous for their fantastic amount and range of visible graves in the landscape that are incomparable to most parts of Europe. This is because we haven't seen the scale of post-medieval cultivation as in many other European regions. Despite this, 90% of cemeteries are damaged. There are very few completely undamaged sites, but still, the frequency of visible graves that can be related to known medieval villages is high. They placed many burial grounds on moraine hills that haven't been affected by ploughing as much as all the cemeteries placed on clay soils.

FL: Do you see the change from collective to individual burial as linked to a shift in personhood?

JL: Yes, I think so, because in the earlier Iron Age we have a situation where people are cremated, and their bones are gathered and collected in a vessel and deposited in another place. Cremation is a practice itself, an act upon an individual body, so that is a form of personal treatment of the dead.

From the Vendel period, there is a new tendency for monumentality surrounding the person, and the entire ritual taking place in the same location: cremation is taking place and then the monument is constructed on this spot. I think in that the person is accompanied by complete (actually a mix of complete and partial) animals in the burial deposits and more artefacts in general. There is a stronger focus on using the burial as a concept or package to display and articulate the identity – manifesting personhood in a more individual way than before. And there are clearly fewer secondary burials in the graves than during the earlier Iron Age. For example, in the Great Mounds, we do not see many secondary burials while this is a far more common pattern in Bronze Age mortuary practices.

FL: The way you describe it – cremation being interred on the spot, rather than taking the dead to the cemetery, you are taking the cemetery to the dead, instead of the other way around – building the monument where the dead are burnt.

JL: Yes, and then you have the social element in specific groups in the burial ground, so that graves from the same phase are concentrated together, suggesting a family or

household identity articulated in the cemetery organisation rather than one collective burial site.

FL: How do we know this is about a family group or is that a supposition?

JL: Given that cremation was near-ubiquitous (99% of burials were by cremation) we don't have clear evidence of aDNA of familial relations in burial practices, and likewise, cremated osteological data cannot easily reveal such affinities. Over recent decades, scholars have been reluctant to talk about 'families', but still, some form of kin-group social organisation remains likely. A famous example is the fairly large Lunda 27 burial site on Lovön west of Stockholm (Petré 1984). Here Bo Petré has shown how graves with male and female attributes are clustered in different groups in different phases. Whether these patterns relate to a farm or a family, or a certain social constellation, we cannot know for sure. But there is patterning in the burial data we can suggest related to the social identities of the dead, and these might well relate to households buried on separate parts of the burial ground. So, at Gamla Uppsala we have at least seven burial sites linked to different clusters of farms – with the ruling family with the great mounds in one location and then others surrounding it.

FL: And the burials are close to, but not within the settlements themselves?

JL: Yes, very close, often only a few metres between the burial site and the nearest settlement remains.

Interpreting Vendel and Viking-period cremation practices

FL: Being the majority ritual for most of the Late Iron Age, what is the generally accepted explanation for the occurrence of cremations in your research area? What's the background of this interpretation: how is it thought to relate to belief systems at the time?

JL: It's very hard to connect burial to Old Norse mythology in a direct and simple way as mortuary practices span a long duration before the stories described in medieval literature. A general thought is probably still that the transportation of the dead is intimately connected with the transport of the soul up in the sky. In many ways, there is a continuity from the Bronze Age with a predominant cremation practice which continues all the way – in different shapes and forms – through to Christianisation. One can consider cremation as a *rite de passage* where cremation transforms the dead and facilitates the journey to the other world. Perhaps it is when they close the graves, rather than the burning itself, that is when the dead are

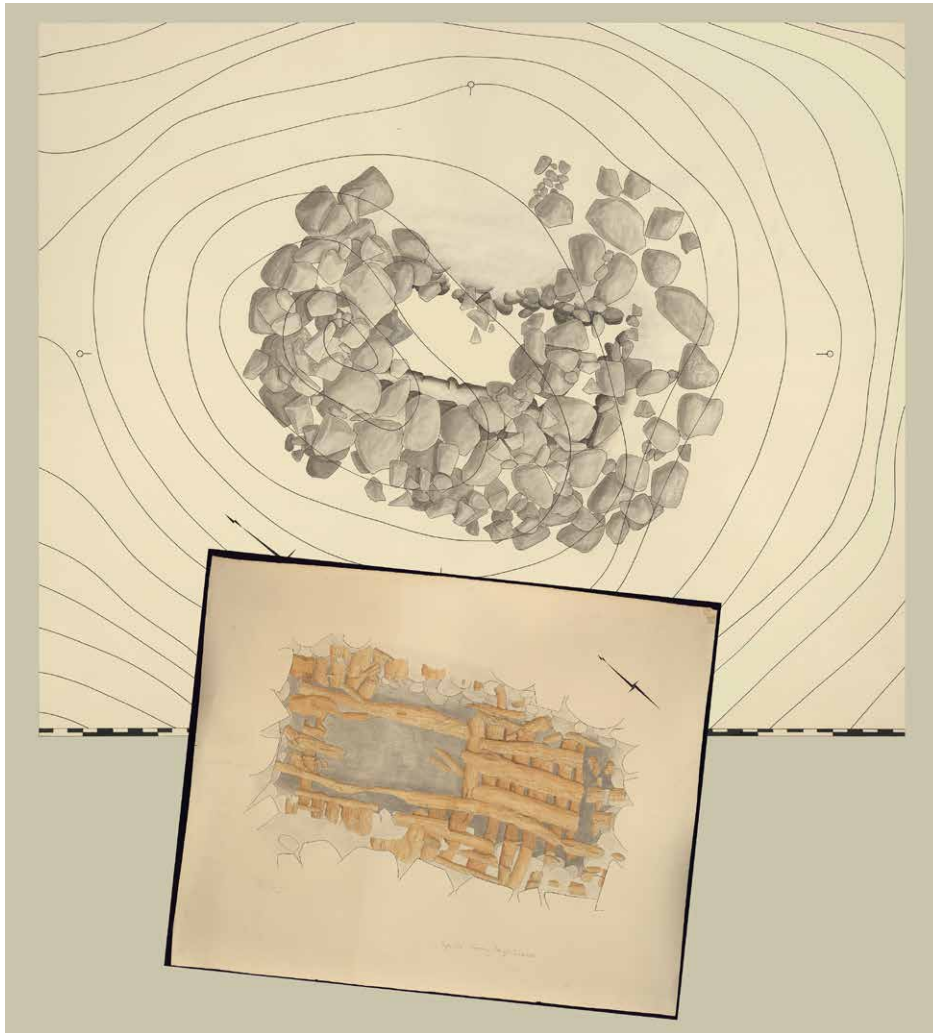


Figure 3.1: The Migration Period chamber grave 24 from Valsgärde. The plundering of this nearly empty grave is recognisable as the absence of stones in the cairn corresponds with a major hole in the well-preserved roof of logs in this grave (Drawing by Museum Gustavianum collections, Uppsala University)

‘sent off’ to their afterlife destination. I think the ‘closing’ of the remains of the cremation is underestimated as a key element of the mortuary process, a least in relation to the cremation or the furnishing of the inhumation burial.

This links to the widespread phenomenon of the grave-robbing or re-opening of inhumation burials (Klevnäs *et al.* 2021). This is what we see with Migration Period chamber graves (Ljungkvist 2011). After the furnishing of the chamber, it has in general been closed with a wooden roof, which in turn has been covered by a cairn and sometimes even an earth layer, shaping the grave into a mound. The grave has been thoroughly closed, but, despite these efforts, almost all chamber graves have been subject to intrusions quite soon after the burial process. It is the same whether the grave dates from around 400 or 500 CE. Therefore, it almost seems to be part of the ritual process rather than a more aggressive effort such as pure plundering or efforts by enemies. There are clear examples from Valsgärde. In one case the wood of a chamber roof is even preserved and shows signs of being broken open by an axe (see Figure 3.1).

This must have been done within a few decades after the burial. I wonder if closing the grave is very important as it is perhaps the equivalent of the cremation process in that it enables the transportation of the dead to the ‘other side’. Once this is done, it is appropriate to revisit and access the graves to retrieve items, at least in the Migration period. It is interesting that we do not see the systematic intrusions during the Vendel period or the Viking Age – some are plundered, and some are not. Something in the way of treating the dead in inhumation burials must have changed, and at the same time, major changes take place in cremation practices.

In the later Iron Age (after 500–600 CE), we are seeing new ideas coming in regarding the attitude and treatment of the dead, and this is articulated through a new narrative in the burial practices, despite the variation between specific graves. The burning and burial in the same spot is a shared idea across the range of different graves and burial sites. There is also a different story in how you go about getting to the otherworld – the eschatology. There

seems to be a shared idea of a horse, a dog and other animals accompanying you to the grave if you are of a suitable status and that you should have more equipment than in the earlier Iron Age. This must relate to a shift in understanding the afterlife journey: the transition into death. A similar importance of animal companions is noted by Löffelmann and Croix (this volume) for their case studies from England and South-West Jutland, respectively.

FL: You describe the inclusion of horses and other animals in cremation burials (Hedenstierna-Jonson and Ljungkvist 2021). What do these cremations containing animals reveal about human-animal relationships?

JL: Different species of animals are treated differently in burials. There are two key types of animals that are always found whole: horses and dogs. In rich burials, there might also be birds of prey and other birds. The rest are tricky because we can have a sheep, a cow, or a pig, but these tend to be the feet or the cranium remains, so you have evidence of some animals to accompany the dead, and some for funerary feasting with elements shared with the dead. So, of course, some animals are more important or have different roles than others. Some of the animals might have been sick, some might have been in excellent shape.

FL: What of regional and intra-cemetery variability in the provision of animals?

JL: Horses, for example, are very common, and many leading persons in a community or a household have a horse sacrificed at their funerals. This has implications for the scale of horse breeding in middle Sweden, where these animals might have been seen as important both in male and female burials. These were riding and perhaps hunting animals, but it seems to be an integrated part of the conception of the burial for wealthy land-owning persons. In the later Middle Ages, the same area's farms are recorded to have on average one to two horses, but especially in the Vendel period it seems it was a common practice to sacrifice horses so they reasonably had significantly more of these animals (Myrdal 1999: 249; Magnell *et al.* 2017: 210–220). Likewise, packs of dogs must have been bred, in part at least, for funerals. Furthermore, a sheep or a goat would be sacrificed for many funerals. The thing is that a horse needn't have been the finest animal available which was selected for sacrifice. Still, in middle Sweden, horses were seen as an integral symbol for death rituals.

FL: Actually, do we know what horses were used for?

JL: It depends; we mostly consider these riding horses but even in the Vendel period boat burials as well as the

Viking period boat burials, they are interred with horse harnesses so they are equipped for hauling. Were these animals used to haul the boats to the burial site? Even in Birka, where there are no boats, the horse equipment by the feet of the deceased still allowed the beasts to have been used for haulage. We often assume the horses were for riding alone, and sometimes this is linked to status, but the hauling role for horses in not only female but also male burials is a topic requiring considerable further research (Hedenstierna-Jonson and Ljungkvist 2021). I think the use of horses for transporting boats and carts is underrepresented when considering their funerary significance.

Howard Williams: Regarding the shift in burial practices in the sixth century, is this connected not only to a shift in attitudes towards the person and the afterlife but also to land and place? Could this focus on wealthy and monumental graves, and prominent burial sites close to settlements, relate to land claims and territoriality?

JL: I think there is a correlation between the permanency of the burial ground in relation to the farms that must suggest it was important for people, but it was not important that everyone necessarily received a very visible monument. But we do have the idea of founder's graves, that at least the earliest graves in the burial ground are more monumental if it is a newly established burial ground, to articulate this claim to a place. You can also renew those monuments, as in Valsgärde. In the first stage, Grave 57 was a large stone setting built in the pre-Roman Iron Age. It held the remains of multiple individuals, both inhumated and cremated (Lindqvist 1934). Around 700 CE, the grave was reused as a rich female was cremated on the surface of the old grave, and the remains were covered by soil, which created the largest burial mound on this site. So that is very significant, as is the importance of big mounds placed in strategic locations beside fording places or by rivers, rather than right next to the farm. Hence, the manifestation of identity in the landscape is a critical consideration. It is important to recognise that there is variability in death rituals, and they were clearly not rule-bound to keep all burials beside the farm. So, if there is a priority to bury the dead beside a river or ford, they will do it – they are clearly flexible in the burial location criteria and strategic as a settlement or village might have multiple burial grounds. So why are some individuals or families interred next to the farm and some individuals and families placed strategically on the edge of the territory beside a stream or fording place? This is a topic that can be explored much further in future research.

FL: I agree that too often, people think there is a one-to-one relationship between settlement and cemetery when it is often more complicated. For instance, cemeteries a short

way apart near Cologne (Müngersdorf and Junkersdorf) are treated as two separate communities. But these groups must have interacted with each other and the cemeteries needn't have served separate communities. So, the relationship between settlement, place of burial and the interactions is something we should definitely explore more critically.

This relates to the next question. You mention there were some inhumation graves, so inhumation co-occurs with cremations. So why are some people burnt and some not? As you have worked on the chronology of the Swedish later Iron Age, are we yet in a position to identify clear chronological trends from the Migration Period onwards?

JL: In the Migration and Vendel periods there are extremely few inhumation graves. Regarding the chamber burials, there is a clear tendency towards male-gendered attributes – some female but mainly male – from the Migration Period. For the middle-Swedish Vendel period, there are only men in inhumation graves, notably boat burials. Only in the Viking Age do we have male and female inhumations.

Gotland is different, where there are many inhumation burials irrespective of status, showing these patterns are regionally variable, although in Gotland, even the richest Vendel-period burials are cremations.

The boat burials of Tuna, Vendel and Valsgärde were created for a distinctive 'social club'. In the case of Valsgärde, this goes back to the Migration Period chamber graves. This seems to be an intentional signalling of martial elite male identities interred in boats, marking their exclusive identity and distinctiveness from the kings nearby interred at Gamla Uppsala, who are cremated as is everyone else. In Valsgärde, probably all, children, elders and women are cremated (Ljungkvist 2008a). Furthermore, this distinctive local narrative is long-running, selecting certain individuals for burial and maintaining this narrative for burial over the long term. I think it is related to how groups of graves relate to each other and their claims to land and resources: a signal down the generations to be part of claims to a place and an identity.

When we move into other parts of Sweden we find very different patterns: it varies a great deal. In the Viking Age, inhumation becomes more common but is still rare. Exceptions include Birka, where inhumation becomes far more common, but this is an exceptional proto-urban site. Here it is again about differentiating subgroups, like those interred by the hillfort and here, irrespective of gender. Then you have the big cremation burial area, which is different again. So, we are looking at subsets of the community, or a social constellation or separate community. This is a different explanation for

the Vendel period boat burials as opposed to the Viking-period inhumations in boats. Still, in both contexts, inhumation is a good way to signal differences from others in life and death.

FL: A purposeful strategy to set yourself apart.

JL: But it doesn't mean they are necessarily the 'kings'. Like in Valsgärde, the boat graves are well preserved and *look* fabulous, but the finds are not paramount in fineness and quantity. The quality of the material culture is not the best or the most precious. We are often seduced by the comparative wealth of the inhumation graves that have not been consumed by the fire.

FL: Clearly how the dead are treated in different areas of Sweden in the Late Iron Age is very diverse. But are there indications of a wider, shared, tradition of burial, possibly reflecting a shared (maritime) culture?

JL: No, there is no shared culture given how much regional variation as Fredrik Svanberg's (2003) work makes an excellent case for. He showed clearly the regional differences in burial practice. Of course, you can see major trends, such as how Gotland and middle Sweden share in the treatment of animals in death rituals in the Viking Age. Likewise, in general, you don't get dogs deposited in graves until the Early Middle Ages, so broader networks of communication that contrast with the Roman Iron Age and most of the Migration period are evident. A problem when dealing with really big trends is that there have been too few revised broader studies in the last decades, too often, generalisations are made from a few exceptional graves or single sites.

However, a major limitation here is that the systematic regional analysis of burial practices has not been conducted for middle Sweden in the same fashion as explored by Fredrik Svanberg for southern Sweden in the Viking Age. If you look at a broad pattern you can see tendencies and patterns in different regions, but the work has not been done yet in a systematic and proper way to see both differences and similarities. For example, in Västmanland you can see complete cremations with weapon sets dating to the eleventh century from this region – including big fighting axes like those depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry (Petersen type M) and horse harnesses (Simonsson 2015). We barely see them in central and southern Uppland, so this is a distinctive regional pattern. This is but one example where chronological and spatial patterns can be identified.

FL: Are you postulating a society that is quite local and where you keep to your own traditions and worldviews in terms of burial and so there are different traditions being played out in close proximity?

Figure 3.2: The Kelthögen 'mound' during excavation. One burial with stone setting and cremation layer is visible in the foreground and others are layered on top of each other, visible in the profile in the background (Photograph by J. Ljungkvist)



JL: Not completely different, more like subtle variations – akin to looking at the distinctive features with fingerprints. The need, however, is to show such subtleties statistically to evaluate their significance. There are, for example, very few excavated burial grounds in eastern Uppland. One very interesting excavation took place a few years ago outside Alunda, c. 35km north-east of Uppsala. Initially, the plan was to investigate a burial ground that included a large mound with the peculiar name Kelthögen (the Celt mound) (Figure 3.2). But the big mound was actually formed by six small mounds built on top of each other within a relatively short interval of c. 50 years (Eklund *et al.* 2020). Another burial ground, found about 10km to the north-east in Skärfthammar, had a similar pattern with several graves accumulated on top of each other. This peculiar assemblage of graves from the same period, placed on top of each other, has not been observed in the central Uppland region around Uppsala. Hence, we have glimpses of clear regional traditions, separated by a forest belt, c. 30–40 km from Uppsala, in an area that lies in a maritime sphere closer to the Baltic.

HW: Unlike some other regions of Europe where cremation is sometimes regarded as 'intrusive', or conversely inhumation is seen as exceptional and 'foreign' within a cremating region, you don't seem to be discussing a similar narrative in Swedish archaeology where different modes of disposal equate with external influences or newly arriving people? What does that tell us?

JL: I agree with what you say, it is like those in the Kelthögen cemetery mentioned above, they still cremate on the spot and more-or-less the same material cultures and structures of the cremation layers. But the difference is that

they chose to reuse space by placing new burials on older ones, or squeezing them in. When I have seen stratigraphic sequences of graves on top of each other, there is normally a considerable period between them. So originally, each grave had its own 'private' space until it was covered by a later grave, say two hundred years later. On this site, each burial is an individual monument, but by placing them on top of each other, they have created some kind of collective sphere. The Kelthögen burials follow the broad burial practice trends but the local and perhaps regional community can create their own practices or dialects of the burial practice.

Considering the 'intrusive' aspect more specifically, it has not been a major point of discussion for Late Iron Age Sweden in contrast with several European areas. Of course, there are previous and existing discussions on, for example, home comers from the wars during the Migration Period or communities of foreigners in the Viking towns of Birka and Sigtuna, which of course, can be related to burial practices. I personally think that 'intrusive' or deviating burial practices can be highly relevant for sites like Birka or for example coastal communities. But in the inlands and large agrarian areas, the processes and patterns are shaped from something that existed earlier, even if the transformation of the sixth century is faster than others before or later. The boat burials at Valsgärde, for example, are an innovation but they are also a continuity on the site as they seem to be descendants of earlier generations on the site, buried in chamber graves (Ljungkvist 2008a).

Status-related interpretations

FL: Regarding status-related interpretations of graves, if younger and elderly people have less material culture,

how does this feed into the idea that rich burials relate to social status?

JL: I agree, there are two factors. There is a social status variation of course across sites and monuments related to the number of metal items and the presence of gold or silver and the volume of sacrificed animals (Ljungkvist 2006: 37–46). However, it is also related to the life cycle of the individuals of certain persons, and then we can reflect on whether they reflect their personal success in life or how they are remembered by others.

FL: And, of course, the regional patterns you identify must be taken into account rather than assuming social status is marked in a burial in the same fashion over time and space.

JL: That's a good question: are we just spinning the idea of a pan-European idea of manifesting status in early medieval graves?

FL: So often popular interpretations equate wealth with 'chieftains'?

JL: Yes, this happens a lot, and it is distracting, and it is very often you see a sword in a grave, and it is assumed to be a 'high-status person' even when it is a simple scramasax. It might not have anything to do with status per se. In Bornholm or Gotland, large numbers of people are interred with swords, so we must bear in mind the context and be cautious about jumping to sloppy conclusions. By analogy, almost every Viking-period settlement has a 'hall' but are all these elite architectures or just the main residence of a farm?! There is always a question of inflation of interpretation.

Monumental mounds

FL: In the Ljungkvist and Henniuss (2020) article you describe the phenomenon of monumentalised burial mounds covering cremations in the Uppland province dating to the Vendel period (550–750 CE). On the other hand, there are monumental boat burials containing mostly inhumations. How do these relate to one another, and how do they relate to other contemporaneous burials?

JL: Monumental mound burials are a matter of regionality in Sweden. In the northern counties of Medelpad and Ångermanland they are frequent already in the Migration period. But in Middle Sweden they do not become common until the early Vendel period, i.e. the late sixth century. As the mounds become common, we also get the boat burials – so rich cremations go hand-in-hand with the rich deposition of horses, dogs and rich objects in boats. Everything gets richer, but also in the middle-class graves. So, we don't have 'royal' or 'princely'

graves in boat graves yet, but we do have similar burials to the Valsgärde in great mounds. Then we have the largest mounds covering wealthy cremations. The boat burials were not that monumental but had 60m long and 8m wide so not that big. This is a very fascinating thing – it implies there were two factions of the elite – at least in the burial record. And these sites are very close – Gamla Uppsala is only 2km from Valsgärde. There is therefore the continuity of burials so they are not successive but co-existing mortuary sites and practices and articulating their mutual differences down the generations. We do not have a really good explanation. In the 1940s Greta Ardwinnsson said that the people in Valsgärde were the 'warriors' while the Gamla Uppsala were the kings, but there are plenty of 'weapon burials' in Gamla Uppsala and in many other burial sites associated with surrounding farms. There has also been a discussion of the possibility that they were temporarily buried at Valsgärde and then moved to Gamla Uppsala, but that isn't convincing as there are human remains in the boat graves.

FL: Did you say there are more females than males in some boat graves?

JL: It is a gendered practice in the region of Uppland in the Vendel period where only males on a few sites in a specific region receive boat-burial – it was a 'guys club' – only later, close to the Viking period, it is afforded to females too (see for example Nordahl 2001). The Viking period is much more complicated and interesting in this perspective. In Valsgärde and Vendel it continues to be boat graves exclusively for males. In places like Sala or Alsike we see a mix. In Tuna in Badelunda, boat graves are exclusively female and all males are either cremated or buried in other inhumation burial forms (Almgren 1907; Arne 1934; Nylén and Schönbäck 1994).

FL: Monumentalised mound burials were ascribed to kings in mythological fashion as late as the twentieth century: can you talk about that a little and how does that influence how we see these burials today?

JL: In Old Norse literature, which deals mainly with Norway, a lot of the mounds relate to kings or chieftains, and they named the mound after a certain person. In Sweden, we don't have that relationship between the sagas and the mounds. The tricky thing is that, in the seventeenth century, scholars started to discover and systematise the mounds and name them after saga kings or in Gamla Uppsala they named them after Thor, Odin and Frey inspired by the account of Ynglingatal saying that Odin came from the east and established himself at Forn-Sigtuna and his companion Frey built a hall at Gamla Uppsala for his residence, and after that, all the kings

were related to Frey and thus had divine ancestry (Snorri Sturlason: Finlay and Faulkes 2011–2015). Therefore, there are tales about the mounds, but they are not as strong as in Norway and Iceland, where it is a different phenomenon as the local traditions and actual farms can be related to passages in Old Norse sagas. In middle Sweden it is more of a contrived antiquarian tradition, as there are far fewer sites mentioned in the sagas.

FL: What do you think motivated those seventeenth-century scholars dishing out these names? Were they trying to create a local or proto-nationalist identity for the mounds?

JL: Yes, it is, a high degree of fashioning an emergent nationalist identity as this was the time when Sweden emerged as a great power in the Thirty Year War and was creating a statement of a fantastical ancestry. Olof Rudbeck, for example, writing the *Atlantic* claiming that Gamla Uppsala was the Atlantis of Plato (Rudbeck 1679–98). It was a matter of nation-building. Scholars and priests have read the Old Norse literature, and they attribute mounds they encounter in their travels to saga heroes such as Bjorn Ironside. In other words, it is a scholarly creation rather than a bottom-up movement.

Cremation specialists

FL: Goldhahn and Oestigaard (2008: 224) identify three Iron Age cremations in Sweden found in ovens. Are there any other Late Iron Age 'places of burning' in Sweden? And what do you think of the close link Goldhahn and Oestigaard postulates between smiths and cremation rituals? Are such symbolic interpretations countered or refined, or generally ignored in broader discussions?

JL: Concerning smiths and cremation burials: for the earlier Iron Age we have identified metalworking sites from ironworking debris, but as far as I can recall, animal bones dominate completely when the bones have been analysed. Consequently, if human bones were used it must have been for very special and unusual metalworking events.

HW: But has there been a broader recognition of pyre sites in whatever contexts?

JL: Concerning pyre sites, there was a shift in the practice in the sixth century (as discussed above). Before that, the dead were cremated in one spot, and chosen remains were moved to the grave/place of burial. But in the Vendel and Viking periods, most of the persons were cremated on the same spot as the mound or other type of monument or grave marker was built. In short, there are no (or very

few) collective or special pyre sites in this period as far as we know (see for example Prata and Sjöling 2017).

FL: This brings us to how important ritual specialists were in the cremation practices: how did they have the expertise to burn a body? Especially with the metalworking evidence, is there any suggestion regarding ritual specialists in terms of cremation or was it just so common that everyone could do it?

JL: I believe there would have been ritual specialists in cremation or in 'burning things' more broadly. There were, in my opinion, of course, some persons or specialists who knew the 'proper' burial rites better than others. But I guess there also were persons who knew how to cremate well. It is one thing to perform the burial act as a ritual to say and perform the correct things. Then there are the really practical issues so you do not mess up when animals are killed or when the cremation act is performed.

There have been very recent and interesting results from Gamla Uppsala where the lowest layer of pyres has been found on the ground (Prata and Sjöling 2017). That's strong evidence that they were cremating people on the site. Some of the burials were disasters because they found the bones had not been fully cremated and were still black, and they found possible carbonised human tissue (or perhaps animal tissue). These partial cremation sites were closed over when not completely burnt (Figure 3.3).

On the other hand, I've dealt with analysing artefacts from high-status later Iron Age cremations, and they are 'always' burnt through to a porcelain colour white. With such large high-status cremations, they are burning multiple horses and dogs and therefore a vast amount of flesh and still every bone is fully fired white. So that must mean that would require a tremendous amount of fuel, perhaps of better quality than in general burials.

I've been part of a few experimental cremations myself, and it takes experience and effort and an extensive plan and a back-up plan if the cremation fails. Mason (this volume) also addresses this difficulty. So by analogy, there must have been specialists for the practical conflagration, let alone the dramaturgical elements postulated for such elaborate ceremonies (Price 2010). But like any performance you need to have contingencies against failure to avoid the social and other ramifications including a poor remembrance of the dead.

FL: With those partial cremations, what do you think is the cause: insufficient knowledge or perhaps the weather or insufficient fuel?



Figure 3.3: The day after a modern cremation experiment. A pig's cranium lying in the cremation layer with some remains of carbonised soft tissue still attached to the not entirely cremated bones (Photograph by J. Ljungkvist)

JL: Weather could be a factor. Some anthracological studies of burnt wood show that they sometimes used energy-inefficient species, including spruce, which burns very fast and is far from ideal for cremation, as opposed to birch or oak. It is perhaps about limited capital or resources because it is an economic investment. If you do not use enough wood or the right kinds of wood, it can go poorly if combined with rain, snow, or very cold weather.

FL: I wonder if there are ways of telling the environmental and climatic conditions during such burning? It would be useful.

JL: You can determine the season from the age of the animals and some plant macrofossil. I can share a study of the wood from the Gamla Uppsala great hall which shows the wicker work from the walls was made from juniper branches and the researcher could see that the spring bark was still remaining on some of the fragments (Hilbert 2020). We know they cut down the juniper in spring. By analogy, there is potential for further work on the plant and animal remains from cremation burials to discern seasonality at least.

Advances in methods and discoveries

FL: What new discoveries or ideas offer exciting new avenues for the study of Late Iron Age cremations? What methodological advances do you see influencing the study of late Iron Age cremations in the foreseeable future?

JL: The burial discussion in Sweden has been rather static (for the Late Iron Age) – not standing still, but it has not evolved in the same way as in the 1970s and 1980s. We have excavated a lot, but we have not developed new approaches. I think the future lies in starting to study large sets of burials to identify both regional and local differences and this requires a larger dataset.

Also, we can do a much more detailed analysis by thinking stratigraphically and reconstructing different stages of the funerary process, including how the funeral pyres were composed and how the cremation processes proceeded and what was done afterwards. This requires detailed excavations and thinking about events and stages and reconstructing these processes.

FL: Do you believe there will be more scientific analyses and experimental approaches?



Figure 3.4: An example of a Viking age cremation burial: Valsgärde 94, excavated in 1951. Top: The exposed stone setting covering the cremation layer. Bottom: The exposed centre of the cremation layer with a pottery vessel and a set of oval brooches and other items placed right next to the vessel (Photograph by the Museum Gustavianum collections, Uppsala University)

JL: I've participated in two serious experimental cremations, and they provide a lot of insights into the cremation process. We haven't done much experimental archaeology over the last thirty years in Sweden, and there is a lot of potential; otherwise, it becomes very hypothetical. It is also good to conduct experiments which fail since the results can be just as revealing as when they go to plan.

HW: Do you think these new discoveries of pyre-bases will inspire this?

JL: Absolutely, and I fear we must have missed crucial evidence in past excavations, and now we realise the potential of certain materials and contexts we can start expecting to find it by learning from the experiments.

Concluding question

FL: If given funding, what aspect of cremation rites would you want to research with methodologies like stable isotope analysis or ^{14}C and what site would you select?

JL: One thing that I would really like to see is a major effort to trace the transition of the burial practice in the sixth century CE. That involves not only the cremation rites but also deposition patterns of objects and animals that we have talked about. Today we are still living with dates that partly are based on studies from the 1980s, partly based on ancient conventional ^{14}C -dates. A new major study, based on modern samples and vastly better calibration curves could be very fruitful. This is the largest ritual transition I know before Christianisation. But how fast was it? In which steps did it proceed? The process has in many ways been staked out in the 1980s, but to frame out in which ways it progressed is still quite blurry. Does it for example coincide with the cold period in this century, which was the result of the 536 and 540 CE volcanic double event (van Dijk *et al.* 2023)? Or does it begin a few decades later?



Figure 3.5: An example of a fragmented but well-preserved comb from a cremation burial. Grave 83 from Valsgärde (Photograph by Mikael Wallerstedt)

Key data and future work: Central Sweden

Where do cremations occur in your research area?

Cremation burials occur everywhere where people lived in this period as it was the dominating burial practice in a vast majority of present-day Sweden until the Christianisation process begins to have an impact in the late Viking period.

In what quantities do cremations occur in your research area?

Cremation burials dominate completely and with the exception of single sites like Birka and smaller regions/areas and, excluding the late tenth to eleventh century with early Christian burials, probably 95–99% of the burials are cremations.

In what forms are cremations deposited in your research area? Are there any indications of pyres?

The most common registered form of deposition in this region is the cremation layer. This is essentially the remains of the funeral pyre itself, where some or most of the bones and objects (and ash/coal) have been concentrated to a central point where we in general find at least one pottery vessel filled with cremated remains. In general, these remains are delimited and/or covered by a layer of stones or a proper cairn (Figures 3.4a and 3.4b).

What types of containers are associated with cremations (for example: urns, wooden containers, leather pouches)?

In this period pottery vessels are the most common forms of cinerary urns. But these vessels in general only contain a portion of the cremated remains as they generally are placed inside the cremation layer.

When objects occur with cremations, what type of objects are they (do they tend to be burnt or unburnt)?

Among the objects personal items generally dominate, such as jewellery and belts or everyday utensils such as knives, fire steels, strike-a-light flint and combs (Figure 3.5). But there can also be rivets or nails from wooden vessels, gaming pieces, rivets representing partial or complete boats/wagons and horse equipment details. The objects are almost always burnt, i.e. they were placed with the dead on the pyre.

Are there funerary monuments or other structures surrounding cremations in your research area?

Cremated remains were likely always covered or marked out in some way. The simplest way is placing a couple of stones around a few bones or sealing the burnt remains with a layer of clay. It is common to mark the graves with a small stone setting/cairn or shallow mound, generally with a cairn in the

centre. Some remains were covered by actual mounds that are characteristic of this period in Middle Sweden.

Is there any noteworthy spatial patterning of cremation burials on the sites they occur on?

There is no general spatial pattern of the cremation burials on sites in general as they dominate completely. It is the burial practice for 'everyone', from the rich to the poor.

What trends can be observed regarding the occurrence of cremation burials throughout time in your research area?

The trends are related to both the actual burial practice and the contents in the shape of objects and animal remains. The largest trend shift takes place in the sixth century CE. New features are that the cremation takes place on the site of the burial, the introduction of more and complete animals and the increased use of mounds as markers/monuments.

Where osteological data is available, is there any apparent selection of deceased according to their sex or age? Are they always individuals or are multiple cremated persons found?

In general, one deceased is related to each burial, regardless of gender or age. Including more than one individual in one burial is not unusual. It was not strange to cremate two persons on the same occasion.

What relationship existed between inhumation burials and cremation burials in your research area? Do they occur on the same site, or even in the same grave context?

As inhumation burials are so rare they nearly always occur in the same places as cremation burials. When groups of inhumation burials turn up, they tend to be reserved for a specific group in a community or family. It appears in most cases to be the leading males or females of a community. In other cases, like Tuna in Alsike, it seems to be a broader spectrum of individuals, cutting across gender and age but perhaps not status (Arne 1934).

Which site in your research area featuring cremation burials deserves more attention, and why?

A very prominent and mostly excavated site is Kumla in Härads parish which so far only has been published and studied in a technical report (Drotz and Ekman 1995). This is a fantastic burial ground with many burials spanning several centuries, representing several families. It is the best-excavated site I know with many graves, and multiple groups, among them several rich cremation burials. It is in several ways a parallel to Valsgärde but without any inhumations/boat burials. This serves as a perfect case study for studying changing practices in the long term and the contrasts between status and practice within an entire community, across age and gender.

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Western Norwegian Cremation Practices from the Viking Age:

Opulent Grave Goods, Absent Bones,
and Elemental Archaeologies

Leszek Gardela

This chapter concerns western Norwegian cremation practices in the Viking Age, specifically between the ninth and tenth centuries. It begins with a discussion on the problems and paradigms of Norwegian Viking Age funerary archaeology and highlights the difficulties in dealing with cremation burials, such as the often-rudimentary quality of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century documentation as well as the poor preservation of osteological remains. The debate then moves on to consider selected case studies from the cemetery of Myklebostad, and explores the possibility that Viking Age cremation rituals involved the 'ceremonial fusion' of four elements (something that is referred to as 'elemental archaeology'): earth, wind, fire, and water. Potential new research avenues are also outlined here, and it is argued that a re-evaluation and re-publication of nineteenth- and twentieth century archaeological material assembled in 1912 by Norwegian scholar Haakon Schetelig could bring fruitful results and substantially enhance our understanding of Viking Age cremation practices.

Vikings, Scandinavia, cremations, elemental archaeology, ship burials

Introduction

Femke Lippok: Can you give an introduction to your Scandinavian work?

Leszek Gardela: I'm a scholar specialising in the Viking Age, researching Scandinavian and Slavic burials since 2003, when I started my studies. Burials really interest me, and from burials, I've moved towards other aspects of life and death in the past. Over the last couple of years, I've investigated material and symbolic meanings of weapons, equestrian equipment, and jewellery, as well as amulets and other magic objects, which gives me a much broader perspective than I started out with (e.g. Gardela 2021a; 2021c; 2022a; 2022b). I have worked on the history and archaeology of Viking Age Scandinavia at the Universities of Oslo and Bergen as well as at the Árni Magnusson Institute for Icelandic Studies and the National Museum of Denmark. I have also personally examined numerous archaeological finds related to Viking Age cremations held in museum collections in Scandinavia as well as in the British Isles, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, and Poland.

Interpreting cremation in Viking-period Scandinavia

Howard Williams: What are the general approaches to mid- to late- millennium cremation burials in Norway? How do inhumations feature in this explanation?

LG: Norway is an interesting case if you compare it to other modern countries. It is different when talking about burial archaeology because there are a lot of burials, many (if not most) of which seem to be cremation burials. A major problem in researching them today is the fact that so many of them were found and excavated by amateurs in the nineteenth century. It is noteworthy that usually their discoverers were not antiquarians and professional scholars deliberately looking for antiquities. It is actually the nature of the landscape and subsistence strategies that have led to these discoveries. The Norwegian population had settled the same areas for generations, and in the process of agricultural work, for instance, ploughing or expanding their fields, they would occasionally come across a grave. While some nineteenth-century discoverers were eager to return the finds to antiquarian societies or museums, others would just keep these objects at home. A Viking Age sword or other fancy antique makes for a splendid display piece on the mantelpiece (on antiquarianism and collectors' interest in the Viking Age, see Roesdahl and Meulengracht Sørensen 1996).

The problem with the unprofessional nature of these discoveries is that there are hardly any drawings, plans, site maps or photographs of the archaeological context. This is the 'curse' of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Norwegian Viking Age burial archaeology. What we do have, and what most scholars working on this material usually use in their research, is lists of items from a particular site or from a particular grave. These lists cannot really be considered on par with 'real' academic publications, as they are usually printed non-peer reviewed in museum journals or registers. Nevertheless, they are easily accessible, many even online, but the publications are in Norwegian, which puts up a barrier for people who don't read Scandinavian languages. Usually, what you have in these journals, one example is the *Bergen Museums Årbok* (*Bergen Museum's Yearbook*), is the name of the site, a very brief reflection of how the finds have been acquired, and sometimes the name of the finder. GPS coordinates are non-existent, of course, and often there is a general description of a mound near a certain location. And what follows is a list of finds. Authors of publications from the early 1900s sometimes classified the different artefacts, but the only typology that was used then was the one created by Oluf Rygh in 1885 in his seminal monograph *Norske Oldsager* (*Norwegian Antiquities*). His book contains a beautiful

black-and-white catalogue of etchings of different finds from Norway with numbers. In order to save space in Norwegian museum yearbooks, instead of providing detailed descriptions of particular items, authors used to write something like: 'this sword is similar to image nr. 159 in Oluf Rygh's book'. This is how a substantial portion of the Viking Age material is documented in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century publications.

Then there are the finds themselves that were preserved in museums. In researching Viking Age graves discovered in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Norway, the methodology can be as follows: you read through the journals, and when you find the objects of the grave you're interested in, you either search for that material online using the museum number ascribed to the grave or specific grave-context (much of this material has been digitised and is available, for instance, on the www.unimus.no portal), or you go the museum that has the material to actually see and/or personally examine it.

As I mentioned earlier, I have been investigating aspects of Norwegian archaeology for some time. When I was working on my PhD thesis in Aberdeen (2008–2012) on Viking Age magic and ritual specialists, a significant part of that work focussed on assembling an inventory of so-called 'magic staffs' or staffs of sorcery (Gardeła 2012; 2016, see also the earlier work of Price 2002). The majority of these c. forty objects come from western Norway (Figure 4.1), predominantly from cremation graves. They are usually made of iron and sometimes have additional decoration in copper alloy. Their handles consist of bent and/or twisted rods forming 'cages' or 'baskets' and bring to mind the shape of spinning tools known as distaffs – these formal associations are not coincidental and are evidently symbolically charged (e.g. Heide 2006a; 2006b; 2006c). Between 2008–2011, I took several trips to see, document and photograph almost every single one of these staffs in person (they are all published in Gardeła 2016). Fortunately, most of them are stored in one institution, namely, at the University Museum of Bergen. What this method has taught me is that one should always strive to actually see and personally examine the objects one writes about – their descriptions in old publications are often incomplete and, in some cases, even incorrect. In the process of investigating the actual finds in museum collections, you learn so much more about them and their burial context. There is certainly great potential in re-visiting old 'archival' material, re-analysing it and re-publishing it using the knowledge as well as theoretical and methodological inspirations that we now possess.

HW: In terms of the nature of this material, the nature of discovery and context of recording means that we don't often have an indication of whether we are dealing with an inhumation or a cremation burial?

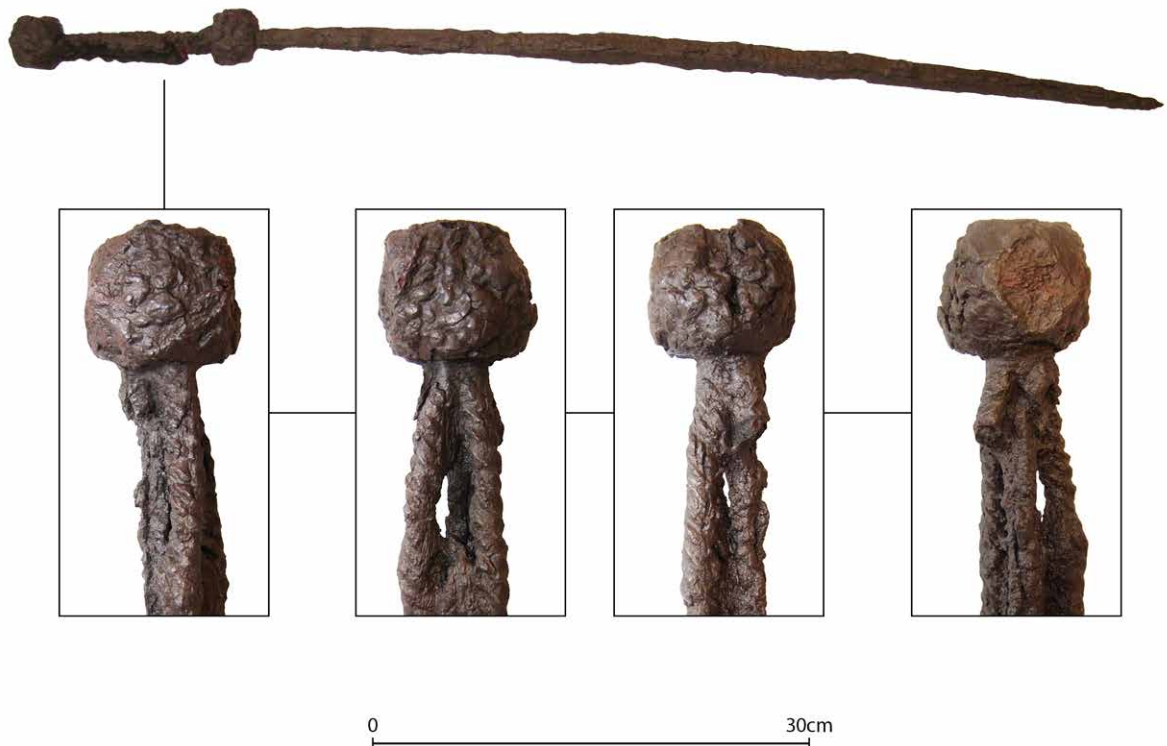


Figure 4.1: Viking Age 'magic staff' from Myklebostad, Sogn og Fjordane, Norway (Photograph by L. Gardela)

LG: Most of the graves, I would say 80–90% of the material, have no surviving bones. So, it is very difficult to make a cremation/inhumation distinction. But scholars think that in the majority of cases, cremation was the preferred way of dealing with the dead. There is evidence that attests to this: the finds that remain of these graves often show signs of burning, and we find molten glass beads, molten or cracked pieces of metal, and burnt ceramic pieces or flint. There is an educated guess to be made that you are dealing with a cremation. In some cases, there are plans from the early twentieth century, when archaeology started becoming a more professional endeavour in Scandinavia and Europe. An archaeologist working in Bergen, Haakon Schetelig (1877–1955), became a very important figure in dealing with the Viking Age and publishing Viking Age burials (e.g. Schetelig 1905; 1912) (Figure 4.2). In 1912, Schetelig released a monograph titled *Vestlandske graver fra jernalderen* (*Western Norwegian Graves from the Iron Age*). Surprisingly, this is *still* the major go-to book when dealing with Viking Age graves from western Norway. To change this, when I was working in Norway in 2018/19, I applied for several grants to revisit some of this material and create an online, freely accessible database. But alas, the applications were turned down. The reason given is

that this type of research is viewed as 'traditionalist'. But if researchers don't have the basic data, we can't do any fresh, insightful and original analyses either.

One of the key objectives of the planned project was new digital documentation of selected and most representative grave assemblages from western Norway held in museum collections. The idea was to prepare new drawings and take new photographs of the finds (incl. photogrammetric 3D modelling). Selected metal objects were to be studied using X-ray and XRF, and surviving organic material (esp. textiles) was to be subjected to microscopic analyses. With an aim to investigate why particular places were chosen for burial, around twenty burial sites were to be surveyed and documented *in situ* using non-invasive methods, and they were to be photographed and filmed with drones. GIS analyses (including viewshed analysis and analyses of LiDAR imagery) were to be conducted with the additional goal of verifying if the burial sites contain other previously overlooked archaeological features. All acquired data was to be entered into an online database available in open access via the project's website.

Of course, I am not saying that *nothing* has been done since Schetelig's 1912 publication. Many scholars have published on Viking Age burials from different



Figure 4.2: Haakon Schetelig (1877–1955) (Public domain)

areas of Norway (e.g. Braathen 1989; Stylegar 2005; 2007; Gjerpe 2005; 2007; Nordeide 2011a; 2011b), but there is still no synthesis of this material which makes it difficult to work with, especially for international researchers that are not based in Norway. It is a pity that the 'Schetelig Revisited' project I planned to conduct was turned down, but perhaps not all hope is lost. I would like to try and apply again.

HW: Are there any cemeteries that are published to a modern standard where you can talk about the relationship between cremation and inhumation?

LG: I mainly specialise in the western Norwegian material where such sites are rare, but elsewhere in the country such sites do exist (e.g. Kaupang in Vestfold – see Stylegar 2007). An important western Norwegian site that immediately comes to mind is Myklebostad (Figure 4.3). It's a fascinating place on many levels. First discovered in the late nineteenth century, the excavator, Anders Lorange (1847–1888), chose to focus on the largest burial mound (Figure 4.4). There is a report of his work, but it is vague about the findings: a few pages of text and some drawings (Lorange 1875). Even though it doesn't measure up to the field data from the Oseberg excavations from 1904 (e.g. Brøgger *et al.* 1917a;

1917b; Brøgger and Schetelig 1927; 1928; Christensen *et al.* 1992; Christensen and Nockert 2006), it is still useful. In brief: this was a cremation grave, and it seems that the funeral orchestrators and mourners burnt the person on a ship *in situ* (see more comprehensive discussions in Oestigaard 2015; Gardela 2019). Once the fire died down and the contents of the pyre had decomposed, they gathered the bones of the (most likely) adult man, placed them in a cauldron and buried them in a pit. Interestingly enough, the cauldron was covered with twelve shield bosses creating a 'barrier' or 'lid' over the bones. Of course, this has a lot of interesting symbolic connotations. In brief, the number 12 is a very meaningful number in Norse tradition ($12 = 4 \times 3$ or $9 + 3$, and the numbers 3 and 9 were also very special; see e.g. Tang 2015; Gardela 2022b). We know from Old Norse literature that the closest retainers or followers surrounding a chieftain or king would have been twelve. This could be considered a literary *topos* because we also have this idea in medieval texts pertaining to the Western Slavic world: Bolesław I the Brave equally had twelve warriors in his closest retinue (e.g. Urbańczyk 2017). Nevertheless, that background makes the occurrence of twelve shield bosses placed over this cremation so interesting. This would have been a burial of royal magnitude.



Figure 4.3: Mound I
at Myklebostad, Sogn
og Fjordane, Norway
(Photograph by
L. Gardela)



Figure 4.4: Anders Lorang (1847–1888) (University Museum of Bergen/Public domain)



Figure 4.5: Detail of the reconstructed Viking Age ship at Sagastad in Nordfjordeid, Sogn og Fjordane, Norway (Photograph by L. Gardefa)

Then, over the shield bosses they placed weapons, some of which were bent or broken. The custom of breaking or bending weapons is a re-occurring theme in especially Norwegian Viking Age burials (Aannestad 2018). Many interpretations can be offered here, from the desire to neutralise the power of the weapon to killing the weapon to symbolically transfer it to 'the other side' (see Grinsell 1961; 1973), rendering the weapon useless for grave robbers and so on.

The ship was probably rather large, approximately 30m long, but nothing survived except for iron rivets. The width of the mound gives us some information, too, which we can use to speculate on the ship's measurements. Based on this data, local enthusiasts have built a 'replica' that represents the Myklebostad ship. The ship is sometimes rowed around the fjord. A museum, called Sagastad, was set up around this ship in 2019 with an exhibition that I helped create, centred around the archaeological site and the local Viking Age population that lived in the area (Figure 4.5). Some of the other graves within Myklebostad are also highlighted in the exhibition. These other graves are documented to a much better standard due to the fact that it was the aforementioned Haakon Schetelig

who came to excavate them in the first decade of the twentieth century. His meticulous work provided a wealth of data (Schetelig 1905). He found that the initially excavated grave was embedded in a cemetery that had both cremation and inhumation graves. Plans and drawings are available, providing invaluable details. The site was especially interesting to me because one of the graves contained a staff or iron rod in the style that we discussed in the introduction.

HW: Is there any clear chronology to show changes in cremation and inhumation practices at this particular site and beyond?

It's not possible to answer this question since this particular site has not been sufficiently excavated. Overall, there are four mounds that have been investigated archaeologically, at least three of which contain cremation graves (Figure 4.6 and Figure 4.7). Some of these mounds actually hold the remains of separately buried cremated and inhumed persons. We cannot speak of a fine chronology, but what we can say safely based on objects is that the chronological range of this site is between the ninth and the tenth century. To give a more specific time frame would be speculation.

HW: A further question about identity: how do we read identities from the burial record for this data? This is something you've published on repeatedly, but might you here address specifically the challenges of cremations in this regard. Is there a different relationship between artefacts, monuments and identity when it comes to these burials?

LG: Western Norwegian material, as I said earlier, has poor bone preservation. Scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were well aware of this and the problem this poses in figuring out identities, gender or biological sex of the deceased. In his publications, Schetelig *decided* that graves with military equipment should be regarded as male, whereas graves with female adornments (e.g. oval brooches, round brooches, trefoil brooches, beads) ought to be considered female. So, whenever a grave containing a sword was found, it automatically was labelled as a male grave. Labelling graves containing weapons as warrior graves, and if there is more than one weapon, such as those of 'chieftains', 'princes' or even 'kings', is common in some academic circles today. Then there is another group of cremation graves which are repeatedly labelled 'blacksmiths' graves' (Grieg 1922; Wallander 1989; Bøckman 2007; Stylegar 2014; Barndon and Olsen 2018). These are graves that contain smithing-tools, hammers and other utensils for metal working. So, in terms of debating identities, it has been rather simple in most cases.

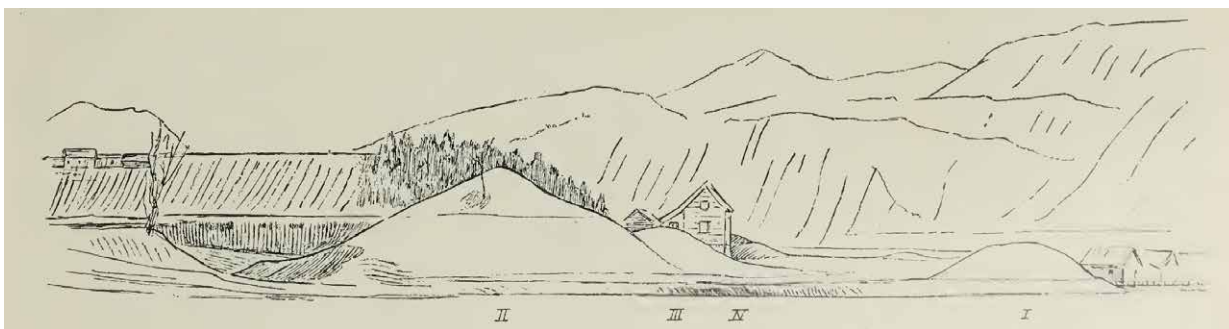


Figure 4.6: A drawing showing the different burial mounds at Myklebostad, Sogn og Fjordane, Norway (After Schetelig 1905)



Figure 4.7: The rich contents of Myklebostad grave III during Schetelig's excavation, including deliberately damaged weapons and tools (University Museum of Bergen/Public domain)

Work by researchers such as Heinrich Härke (1990; 1992; 1997; 2014), Jerzy Sikora (2013; 2014) and Howard Williams (2006) that counters these interpretations seems to not have had a great effect in some European regional traditions, and that applies to western Norway, too. Interpretations from an early twentieth-century paradigm are still adhered to; and the idea that artefacts reflect social roles and identities in a straightforward fashion

is still prevalent in some academic publications. I can understand that, in part, since the nature of the evidence is so fragmented, there are no bones that could be subjected to specialist bioarchaeological and aDNA analyses, and scholars feel obliged to give some interpretation.

I do mention some more nuanced cases in my recent book *Women and Weapons in the Viking World: Amazons of the North* (Gardela 2021c), one of which is interesting

in many ways. Unfortunately, for this regionally focused interview, it's an inhumation grave from Nordre Kjølén in Hedmark in eastern Norway, which was discovered by amateurs. The finds were brought to the museum in Kristiania/Oslo, and Gustav Mørck, the scholar who published the grave, labelled it as a 'shield maiden' in his first publication on it (Guldborg 1901; Mørck 1901; see more recent discussions in Gardela 2021b; 2021c). Considering that the initial publications concerning Nordre Kjølén were from the early 1900s, that was a rather progressive view to express. More recently, researchers like Marianne Moen and Julie Lund have put a lot of effort into nuancing very binary gendered and stereotypical interpretations of Norwegian Viking Age graves (Moen 2019a; 2019b; Lund and Moen 2019). Moen's archival work has also shown that traditionally gendered groups of utensils, such as cooking tools, are found in male and female graves alike.

Another issue to address here is that not everyone in this time period would have been given a burial that would have left an archaeological trace. As with any cemetery in north-western Europe, you will encounter graves rich in objects and graves without objects. In Norway, statistically speaking, most graves are richly furnished. It is important to highlight the fact that due to the poor preservation of human and animal remains (as well as other organic remains), it is often challenging for archaeologists to identify 'findless graves', either cremations or inhumations.

HW: So that's not just the bias of people only reporting these finds when there are artefacts, you think there is something bigger at play here?

LG: Yes, I think it's probable that the graves that we have today are not the graves of the 'average Viking Age villager'. They probably belong to more prominent people, whereas the bulk of the society was buried in other ways that we cannot trace or have left no trace.

HW: As per the 1958 *The Vikings* film in which flaming arrows are shot into a longship!

LG: Perhaps not precisely like the Hollywood stereotype, but I imagine it as a possibility! When you think about western Scandinavia, this makes a lot of sense because anyone who's been in Norway and who's tried to dig a pit or trench somewhere in the mountainous landscape will discover that that's not so easy. In 2014, I went to a Viking festival near Trondheim. Together with my colleague and illustrator Mirosław Kuźma, we organised an open-air exhibition of his artwork. It took us two days to dig ten holes for outdoor board stands. So, imagine doing that for a large human-size burial pit.

Rethinking cremation over water

HW: Putting filmic and televisual representations to one side (but see Williams 2019), I've had so many discussions about this where scholars absolutely insist that burning on water absolutely should not be considered a possibility. I've always been a bit hesitant, because obviously if you put a body on a boat without any other pyre material, it won't burn. But if you know what you are doing, surely it is practically possible?

LG: I've never seen this recreated in experimental archaeology or historical re-enactment. But why not! The poem *Beowulf* mentions something like this in the dispatching of Scyld Scefing over the waves (*Beowulf* 26–52; Fulk 2010: 89). But even if the burning on water wasn't happening, they could have easily burned someone on land and scattered them in the water, equally leaving little trace of the burial. That actually may have been one of the possibilities: scattering cremains in the landscape in significant locations, on a mountain, in lakes or fjords (cf. Wessman, this volume). Perhaps this was more of a usual burial practice, whereas the cremations with elaborate mounds were the exception and reserved for prominent people. Those would have been funerals to remember.

HW: We haven't actually had many people say things about cremations in a water burial context. I think it is important to be open to this possibility.

LG: That's why it is so crucial to actually go to all those places and experience the landscape. When you see the archaeological sites and the surrounding nature, it makes you think of local possibilities and impossibilities. In this land of stone and water, scattering cremains in fields and from mountains or in lakes, rivers or the sea should at least be considered as possibilities. In trying to get into a Viking Age mindset, we have to consider that some would have travelled and seen the world, but just as many would not have travelled a lot. They probably looked toward the ocean and perhaps mythologised the world beyond the water. It seems perfectly feasible that water was a physical but also a symbolical boundary between the existing 'human world' versus 'the other world'. Sending someone to the other world by scattering them (or their cremains) in the water makes total sense in this worldview. Anyone who has read works in the history of religion will confirm that water is often conceptualised as a barrier between worlds (e.g. Eliade 1996; Kowalski 2002; Kotowicz 2007; Lund 2010; Raffield 2014; Kajkowski and Kuczkowski 2017; Kajkowski 2020; Gunnell 2021). This is a pan-European motif.

HW: From my limited reading, this is also true for some North American conceptualisations of cremation.

And in these far-travelled populations, it is not odd to think that the spirits of the dead might be perceived to travel through landscapes they know intimately (e.g. Spier 1933). In other words, the dead and the living do not simply inhabit different parts of the landscape, they move through it together, sometimes by similar routes, sometimes in contrasting fashions. Such notions might well have influenced Viking Age people, too, and they are able to hold those two ideas regarding journeying in life and death in mind and in the same landscape. The other world might be conceptualised as accessible *through* the physical landscape and it can be a very specific landscape, not an abstracted otherworld. I'm merely speculating whether such ideas might apply to the fjords, coasts, and islands of western Norway. People have been quite emphatic to me: cremation could not have taken place near or on the water and the stylised filmic and televisual representations are just a 'myth' and that all the dead must have been interred in cairns and mounds (Williams 2019). I wonder whether archaeologists are being too dogmatic on this point.

LG: I take your point because these communities were not very large. Norwegian settlements were generally not like Birka in Uppland, Sweden or Wolin in Western Pomerania (Pomorze Zachodnie), Poland, which within its heyday, had an estimated population of several thousand. At best, a western Norwegian village would probably have had a hundred people at one time. But with limited amount of usable land available, where do you bury your dead? I don't want to go too far with my interpretations, but in cremation practices, there might also be an idea of combining/fusing the four elements in a burial rite, the earth or trees, the fire, wind... and then what's left is water. It could be the last act.

HW: Fascinating! I think elemental archaeologies have received some traction in mortuary studies, but I do feel this remains an under-investigated field for the Viking period (Sørensen and Bille 2008).

LG: Maybe we talked about this before, but we do ourselves such a disservice by not going into all of these possibilities. By excluding them, we set ourselves up looking like we are peddling misinformation. Dogmatic assertions won't get us anywhere and it limits the possibilities for researchers and for our public engagement before we even pursue them!

Concluding remarks

FL: Do you have any concluding reflections?

LG: Well, just to sum up: in western Norway skeletal material is scarce, but cremation burials are relatively rich

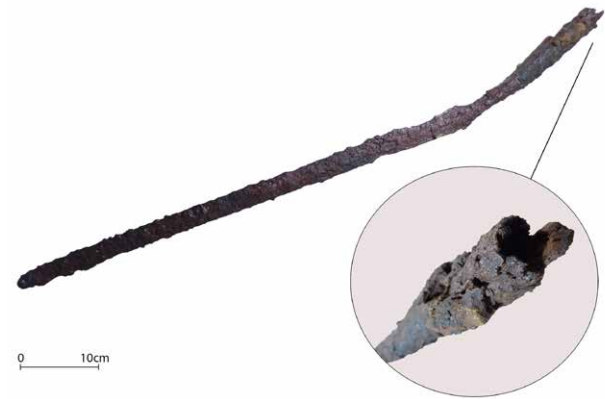


Figure 4.8: A Viking Age weaving sword from Sanddal, Sogn og Fjordane, Norway (Photograph by L. Gardela)

and include material culture that only very rarely occurs in other parts of Scandinavia. Some graves, for instance, contain weaving swords that look like massive spearheads (Figure 4.8). Then you have lots of other domestic utensils that are not usually found in Viking Age graves in Norway, Denmark or Sweden, such as huge cauldrons or soapstone bowls or weaving combs for sheep's wool, spindle whorls and spindles made of animal bone, jewellery of different kinds and beads as well. These graves are very opulent in this regard. Then, of course, there is the landscape, which is a factor that is often underestimated and perhaps not emphasised enough in the work of Norwegian archaeologists (but see Moen 2011; 2014; Resi 2013; Westlye 2019, Westlye *et al.* 2023). Perhaps they often don't see the landscape as a phenomenon because they are just so used to it. The general scarcity of arable land needs to be a factor in considering what locations are being used for the dead. It's a very elemental and, in some ways, hostile or harsh environment to live in.

HW: One thing about cremation that I haven't asked anyone is how much whale oil could facilitate cremation practices? We have increasing evidence for mid-/late first millennium CE sea mammal hunting (Hennius *et al.* 2018). Also, in Iceland, people have said that there are only one or two cremations which might be logical because of there not being any wood to burn anyone with. But you can cremate with seaweed and you can cremate with turf. I simply wonder whether we are missing out on potential other sources of fuel and thus modes of cremation.

LG: As far as I know, it's not so easy to burn with seaweed, but it can have a variety of uses and applications. There are a couple of academic papers on the use of (burnt) seaweed (e.g. Mooney 2018). But this discussion has not been considered for cremation practices but instead for agriculture, ironworking, glass manufacture, and perhaps



Figure 4.9: The large standing stone (bauta stone) in Gutdalen, Sogn og Fjordane, Norway (Photograph by M. Fricke)

to heat houses. I've seen some of the experiments, and the seaweed doesn't really burn; it just produces a lot of smoke. But perhaps there is a way of preparing it that would work. I can imagine that there are some possibilities there.

FL: And it adds that missing water element to the pyre!

LG: Exactly, excellent point!

HW: I'm just thinking that we are not thinking through all the possibilities because we are stuck in what we think we already know and not looking further than that.

LG: There is also the interesting idea that you can (and this comes back to the gender question) perhaps sometimes use certain kinds of artefacts and the specific manner of their deposition to 'figure out' the deceased people's gender. I mentioned that in Myklebostad the bones of the alleged 'chieftain' or 'king' were placed *inside* a cauldron. In situating this grave into a broader context of Norwegian graves, it seems that actually male bones were placed in containers, whereas female cremains were scattered. In the case of presumed female graves, the vessels would be standing somewhere nearby. Based on this kind of ritual of placing the bones inside or outside a container, you could maybe wager a guess if a cremated individual was female or male.

Key data: Western Norway

Where do cremations occur in your research area?

My research area embraces the territory of western Norway and the counties of Hordaland, Møre og Romsdal, Rogaland, and Sogn og Fjordane. In these areas, cremations occur both very close to the coast (i.e. mounds would have been visible from seaborne ships approaching the shore) but also further inland, near lakes and rivers. Cremation graves, as well as cemeteries with such graves, are also not very far away from human settlements. One may thus speculate that the people buried in the mounds were both in life as well as in death part of the community that lived in the nearby farm or village.

In what quantities do cremations occur in your research area?

They can occur on their own, for instance, in the form of an isolated mound in the open landscape or in groups forming a small-size cemetery. The number of graves usually does not exceed fifty in one particular site.

In what forms are cremations deposited in your research area? Are there any indications of pyres?

The external structure usually takes the form of an earthen mound or cairn. Inside the mound/cairn, the cremated remains are either scattered and form an irregular-shaped layer, or they are placed inside containers, for instance, metal vessels. There are not always clear indications of pyres, but it is safe to assume that at least some of the cremation practices took place *in situ*.

What types of containers are associated with cremations? (e.g. urns, wooden containers, leather pouches?)

As noted above, vessels – sometimes imported from distant locations (e.g. the Insular world) – are associated with cremations. Whether or not human and animal remains or specific grave goods were placed in organic bags or pouches is difficult to ascertain due to poor preservation.

When objects occur with cremations, what type of objects are they? (do they tend to be burnt or unburnt?)

Cremation graves in western Norway are usually very richly furnished. They can contain virtually all kinds of weapons (swords, spears/spear heads, axes/axe heads, shields/shield

bosses), tools (e.g. knives, whetstones, needle cases, spindle whorls, loom weights, weaving combs, hammers, tongs, keys), vessels (made of metal, glass or soapstone), jewellery (e.g. brooches, pins, rings, arm-rings, chain-necklaces), religious objects (e.g. staffs, amulets). The objects can be either burnt or unburnt – this varies from place to place.

Are there funerary monuments or other structures surrounding cremations in your research area?

In some locations, there are large or mid-size standing-stones nearby Viking Age cremation graves. One such site is Gutdalen, where a large so-called ‘bauta stone’ stands to this day (Figure 4.9). Structures like this are usually not directly associated with Viking Age cremation graves.

Is there any noteworthy spatial patterning of cremation burials on the sites they occur on?

No, or at least none that can be regarded as a spatial pattern.

What trends can be observed regarding the occurrence of cremation burials throughout time in your research area?

Throughout the Viking Age (eighth–eleventh centuries), the general trend is that cremation graves are relatively richly furnished. They also tend to be made visible in the landscape by erecting mounds or cairns over them. Cemeteries with cremation graves are usually established in places that would have been visible both from major land-routes and from waterways.

Where osteological data is available, is there any apparent selection of deceased according to their sex or age?

No.

What relationship existed between inhumation burials and cremation burials in your research area? Do they occur on the same site, or even in the same grave context?

Cremations and inhumations can occur in the same site and in the same context (e.g. Myklebostad). They are rather similar in terms of their furnishings – i.e. the same kinds of grave goods are found in both types of graves.

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Cremation in Southern Scandinavia: The Case of South-West Jutland

Sarah Croix

The eighth-/early ninth-century burial ground adjacent to the emporium of Ribe is, with Lindholm Høje and Nørre Sandegård Vest, one of the few large ensembles documented in Southern Scandinavia just before the traditional starting date of the Viking period. The burial ground is bi-ritual (mixed-rite), and both cremation and inhumation burials display a broad range of finer variations. New methodologies emerging from close collaborations with the archaeological sciences have brought new insights into the complexity of the mortuary processes behind such variations. Burial diversity is to be understood in the framework of Ribe's location in South-West Jutland and its privileged access to the coastal regions of the eastern part of the North Sea region. It also testifies to the social and cultural dynamics of an emergent urban community in a rural, regional context.

Cremation; mortuary archaeology; methodology; urbanism; Viking Age; human-animal relationships

Introduction

Howard Williams: Could you introduce yourself and your work relating to early medieval cremation burials in the context of your other work?

Sarah Croix: First of all, thanks a lot for having me in your project, which I have been following for a while. Your earlier focus with the interviews was on Continental Europe, which seemed to be treated as a different sphere from Northern Europe. It seems to me that when we keep working with those regions separately, we keep on repeating differences and boundaries which we ourselves made up. So, I'm happy that you are broadening the geographical sphere, and I'm sure it will show that there are so many more similarities between those regions than we normally assume.

My name is Sarah Croix, I am now Associate Professor in Archaeology at the University of Aarhus. I've been working here for sixteen years now (since 2008), and this is where I wrote my PhD on gender aspects in rural settlements in Viking-Age Scandinavia. After that, I started working with Ribe, with the early Viking age emporium. My first project there was about reassessing the emporium site: looking at older excavations and seeing if we can get new knowledge about the development of the site through the stratigraphic documentation from previous excavations. This is how I got into the topic of both urbanisation and Ribe.

While we were working on that project, my colleague Søren Sindbæk and I had the opportunity of planning a student-training excavation at Ribe together with the Museum of South-West Jutland and Morten Søvsø. Excavating the emporium site itself is a major task, it's very expensive and very complicated – which we eventually got to do in the now completed Northern Emporium project (Sindbæk 2022; Sindbæk 2023). But at that stage, there were also other questions to be answered, like what is going on around the dense settlement area of the emporium. That is why we targeted a parking lot, easily accessible and at the periphery of the emporium. There had been excavations previously in this area, so we knew that we would be investigating parts of fortifications from the Viking period, as well as Viking Age graves from the eighth and ninth century CE (Feveile and Jensen 2006).

We were striving to refine the chronology, trying to understand the extent of those occupations and the relationship between them. That's how we started fieldwork in 2014, and then we had two more campaigns connected to the student excavations at Aarhus University. During those campaigns, we excavated twice as many graves than were previously known. We ended up with about one hundred burials documented for the early pre-Christian cemetery at Ribe. This new material got me working with mortuary practices, something I hadn't really worked with before, although I had considered gendered grave-good deposition during my PhD. It's the material that required it of me. The extent of the cemetery was a surprise, and some of the mortuary practices we could see were very unique to Denmark and Scandinavia for this period. The excavation really just raised more questions, and that is how I started looking at that material.

Past interpretations of cremation in South-West Jutland: Ribe in context

Femke Lippok: What is the generally accepted explanation for the occurrence of cremations in your research area? What's the background of this interpretation?

SC: If you look at Ribe itself, the cemetery from the eighth–ninth century CE, you can see that both cremation and inhumation were practised within this relatively short period. Within those two groups, there is also a wide range of variations and forms. The presence of cremation burials is not a surprise because, in some form, cremation deposits in a pit or an urn are widely documented in South Scandinavia in this period. There is variation in which type of urn is used, or if any urn is used at all. In the region around Ribe, in South-West Jutland and the Northern Frisian islands, there are also burial grounds with cremation deposits in urns from the eighth century CE. Generally, cremation practice has a long tradition in the coastal regions of South-West Jutland, as it is more

generally so in the eastern part of the Northern Sea region and along the Frisian coast. In that context, cremation is a product of a long-term regional tradition rather than an entirely new disposal method.

FL: What about the cemetery's context next to an emporium – how does that impact the interpretation of what is going on at the cemetery? What can the cemetery tell us about the permanence/semi-permanent occupation of Ribe? How does the cemetery differ to contemporaneous cemeteries that are perhaps aligned to a more permanent burial community?

SC: People have always thought about the emporium when thinking about Ribe: the plots, the workshops and so on. This is different from Birka or Hedeby, where the mental picture is more equally shared between the settlement site and the burial grounds because these are so well known, extensive and well published. Those sites have been looked at for 150 years, so it's a slightly different picture at Ribe.

Ribe still has a modest burial ground in comparison to Birka and Hedeby, it's also in use for a shorter duration, and the extent of the emporium is smaller too. Of course, the questions are directed towards understanding what's going on at the emporium: what kind of community was living there? How did it develop as an urban site? Where does the impetus come from in letting a site like this thrive, how is it settled? Are settlers from the local region or are they people coming from far away? And how densely populated was the emporium?

This echoes a widespread discourse about the early medieval emporia in Northern Europe as consisting of communities of merchants and artisans, even some of them itinerant artisans. But were they all men or were there also families? What was the social fabric of a place like that? The activities of these communities are also linked to some degree of mobility. This brings in the cultural aspect; where people come from and the social-dynamic aspect of how they manage to function together as a community.

Putting the cemeteries in that framework influences the questions you ask about the burial remains. When I started working on the cemetery, the questions I had were very much in this direction: can we see cultural differences, can we see a demographic that would hint at a male bias, or do we see families as well? And what we found out was that demographically, we have people of both biological sexes and of all ages according to the anthropological analysis (Østergaard 2017). We also have a relatively high proportion of children for South Scandinavia in this period (Croix 2021). It's still far from reflecting the probably high rates of child mortality, as we later see at medieval churchyards, but it is a significant feature of the cemetery.

Concerning the diversity in burial practices, even though there is also a fair amount of variation in the local landscape, there are some aspects that can't be purely local. That's part of the reason that we did strontium isotope analysis, to try and track mobility and see whether some burial practices could relate to people coming from very far away (Croix *et al.* 2020). As we were working with cremated remains, we couldn't apply isotopic approaches other than strontium. This meant that we couldn't narrow down where people are coming from. Another issue was that what would appear geographically local in strontium terms is actually a very broad region, including much of South Scandinavia and large parts of the North-Sea region. On the other hand, when you see non-locals in this type of dataset, these would be people from quite far away. It turned out there weren't that many people from very far away. I had an expectation that there would be a lot of non-locals, as the evidence for international trade we know from the rest of the emporium would suggest. Most people buried in Ribe likely had their childhood in Ribe or South-West Jutland – or in regions along the eastern coasts of the North Sea. This made me wonder what a non-local person would be in a cultural landscape like Ribe's. Would someone from West Frisia be culturally perceived as a foreigner or as a local person? Strontium-wise, you wouldn't see the difference, which is a limitation of the method. But at the same time, it is also a confirmation of the importance of archaeology and of understanding context and cultural information for interpretation.

To me, it looked like a community that was culturally quite diverse, with input from neighbouring regions outside Jutland, and also included family life. The population is not biased towards adult males at all. This corresponds well to the new results we had from the recent excavation at the emporium itself, in the Northern Emporium project, where we've uncovered sequences of houses where we see domestic life throughout the eighth and ninth century CE. So, the two sets of evidence fit nicely together; we see a well-settled community in Ribe throughout this period, who is also using that burial ground before abandoning it at some point around the mid-ninth century CE.

FL: That is one of the things I found so striking if you think about seasonal activities in places like Ribe, you wouldn't expect there to be an established burial ground.

SC: Exactly, and I think the cemetery is an important criterion in this urbanism discussion, which has been somewhat overlooked. Distinguishing emporia and seasonal trading sites, which we have in great quantities for the Viking age in South Scandinavia, is not that straightforward if you only look at trading networks and production, although those can vary greatly in intensity, diversity and scale across sites. The seasonal trading sites, however,

don't have extensive burial grounds. I'm not saying people didn't die there, but they evidently didn't think that these seasonal places were the right places to bury their dead. Establishing a visible, marked burial ground which is repeatedly reused for that purpose, I think, could lead to a strong sense of place emerging from repetitive engagement with that place (Moen 2020). This reinforces the idea of a strongly settled community at Ribe.

HW: One of the many things I like about your paper in the Viking congress proceedings (Croix 2020) is that you made that point really well. I've tended to see in the literature about the proto-towns, emporia, that cemeteries are really a reflection of the scale and character of the population. I don't think I've seen that point made before, exploring how cemeteries were more than simply an index of population presence. That is a really important point, more broadly, for the significance of cemeteries for Viking towns. Has this point been considered for other Viking towns?

SC: I think it's a very important point. Sven Kalmring published a paper recently about a related topic: scholars referring to emporia as places without a history or representativeness in opposition to post-Roman towns, which are conceived to have this 'ancestry' and monumentality (Kalmring 2020). True enough, the emporia don't have ancestry in that sense, but how long does it take to build a history, to invent a tradition? If you have a place of memory, like a cemetery, which is visible in the landscape that you engage with over and over again, that could easily and quickly become a common reference point of the history of a place.

HW: The cemetery contains inhumations as well as cremations – do you interpret this as one burial community having the choice of different burial practices, or do you think they represent different burial groups that just happened to bury their dead in the same spot? And what is the current role of ethnicity and associated burial practices in this debate at Ribe?

SC: To be able to answer the first part of the question, there is a parameter of which we have no full control yet: it's chronology. We tried to date by radiocarbon, mostly confirming that we were in the long eighth century CE, but we are still working on refining the dating intervals. Questions like if there are any changes in burial practices on a generational scale are then difficult to answer. We can't really see this type of fine-tuning in preferential mortuary treatment. We can see in some cases of burials with stratigraphic relations that a cremation deposit cuts an older inhumation grave, but at the same time, it seems that both cremations and inhumations were practised at the same time. There is not really any spatial clustering

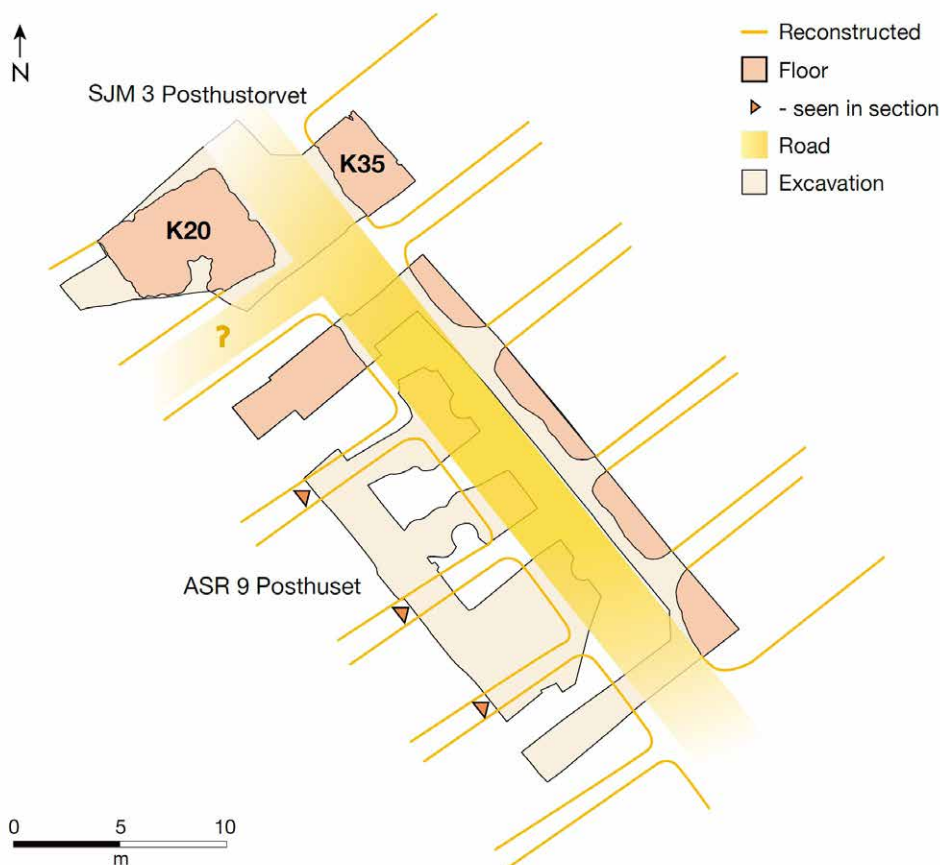


Figure 5.1: Reconstructed layout of the plot system at Ribe's emporium, as it would have been around the middle of the eighth century (Graphics by Søren M. Sindbæk; Sindbæk 2022: 450, fig. 14.5)

separating the two main burial treatments, it seems all to be very mixed. And that also includes a few inhumations that were buried in coffins with the dead in supine position and the head in the west in accordance with early Christian customs, which is thought-provoking for a presumably pre-Christian site. Like other burial forms, west-east aligned inhumations in coffins are not clustered, they are all spread throughout the cemetery. If there were separate burial communities, I would have expected a bit more of a spatial clustering of similar types of graves and I couldn't really see that.

There is one other thing: when you look at the emporium site, consisting of those narrow plots, one would have lived very close to one's neighbour, a couple of metres at best. The town infrastructure, with the paved street running through, suggests there was some form of communal life at the emporium (Figure 5.1). Artisans may have collaborated across specialisms, and the inhabitants would have had to deal with one another to some extent, even if they were a composite/mixed and/or itinerant population. There had to be some kind of social system and regulation to make it work. And I wonder if this communal life would be reflected in the burial ground. The fact that a single area was selected and used for all the dead, despite differences in ideas about burial

practices, suggests at least some kind of consensus within this community.

Then there is the ethnic question; perhaps you've noticed in my other work that I am very careful around this theme. I try to discuss 'cultural affinity' rather than 'ethnicity', the reason being that in that particular historical context where you have the Carolingian sources talking about Frisians and Saxons, the Franks seem to be building ethnic groups to fit their own political agendas and frameworks (Croix and IJssennagger-Van Der Pluijm 2021). I find it quite difficult to apply these criteria to the interpretation of burial practices from those regions and to identify that this person in Ribe is (say) a Saxon or a Frisian. I don't think that's really applicable also because the material culture suggests there are strong cultural similarities and contacts connecting these regions together. So how different would they have perceived each other? That's the reason why I'm trying not to apply these labels. Talking about communities with different cultural affinities is my way of avoiding the problem of terminology and its potential misleading connotations.

HW: It's a minefield! You can't get away from it and it's hard to strike that balance where people can clearly understand what you mean.

SC: That's the thing, you have to be really precise if you want to use those terms. It's difficult because people in the past probably had a sense of identity and probably would have had their own words to call themselves; groups they wanted to affiliate themselves with, and groups they didn't want to affiliate themselves with. So, in a sense it's a shame that we can't approach these questions more specifically in archaeology, but future interdisciplinary work, with history and the natural sciences, is a fruitful avenue.

Interpreting Ribe's cremation practices

FL: If at Ribe you had those groups with different cultural affiliations, do you think one of the groups would have been cremating their dead, and another group would have chosen inhumation instead? Or is it rather more mixed?

SC: I think it's quite mixed, because all those communities that were probably present at Ribe, looking at Jutland and West Frisia and the Saxon regions: they all also practised a bit of the same range of burial rites (see Knol, this volume). And that's the tricky part: there is no single group which has one unique way of burying their dead. But there are subtle variations in how they utilise both disposal methods in the different regions which are worth tracking. In short, no burial practice equates to one ethnic group; all groups mixed things up among themselves already. This is what defines the coastal communities of the North Sea region: a complex set of long-term historical interactions with each other.

FL: Can you tell us a little about the positioning of objects with cremated remains at Ribe, especially those unburnt objects on top of cremations. Do you have any ideas on what role this selection of tools played in the creation of the burial ritual and social memory of the deceased? Perhaps something made in fire should not be 'unmade' in fire!

SC: Generally, the graves at Ribe are not particularly well-furnished. Cremations are relatively better furnished than inhumations, but they are still the exception. Most of the furnishings are part of the extended dress, for example, glass beads that were probably fitted as a necklace or perhaps even used to decorate a bonnet, as might be the case in one of the inhumations. The glass beads melted into each other and sometimes encapsulate pieces of bones from the human body they were placed onto. Most of the time, you can clearly see if these goods were placed directly on the pyre, then gathered and placed into a pit or urn. Placing cremains in an urn is also more the exception than the norm.

In those few cases, there are even fewer that have additional unburnt objects. I would imagine that after they'd placed the urn in the soil, they would have added

these unburnt objects on top of these graves. It might have been a significant practice for the participants at the heart of the burial when the urn is actually deposited. The top of the urn would have remained visible for some amount of time before they would cover the grave. One particular case that comes to mind involved a set of tools, a saw and a pair of shears that was placed on top of the urn. I wondered if this is part of this visual representation, the memory construction for the deceased. I was also wondering whether or not some things should not be burned because they were to be retrieved, or at least that the possibility of retrieving them should be open. The practice of retrieving things from graves has been discussed a lot, especially for richly furnished inhumations (Klevnäs *et al.* 2021). But it's much easier to reopen a cremation deposit and collect things, especially if they are placed as nicely on top of the urn as in the previous example. So, should we think of the objects on top of cremation deposits as temporary deposits, to be retrieved at some later point?

I was thinking about your suggestion concerning what was made in fire should not be unmade in fire. I like the suggestion, but if you think about the glass beads, that are a product of pyrotechnical craft, it does not seem to fit completely.

FL: I'm so happy you addressed post-depositional practices and re-openings! Does the archaeology at Ribe reveal anything about these aspects of the funerary process?

SC: Sadly, no. That's the big challenge at this site: the locality has been used for subsequent occupation more-or-less continuously since the cemetery went out of use. The topsoil has been heavily truncated so we don't know how much, but it could easily be between 0.5–1.0 m in some parts of the site. The original walking surface is certainly lost, so we also lost a lot of burials to this. There could have been many more small cremation deposits on the surface or in shallow pits originally than could be recorded. It also means that some inhumations seem very shallow but weren't necessarily so, as only the lower level is preserved. Any kind of later intrusion or stratigraphic relation to other features is difficult to see. I wish that we had this information, but sadly this is what we have to work with.

FL: In an article you composed with Nelleke IJssennaggers (2021: 315) you suggest a possible shared mortuary repertoire between Jutland and West Frisia. I understand from your work that the cremation practices show similarities, but do the inhumation burials also show similarities?

SC: To find similarities, you have to go into the finer details of what is going on. Cremation in pits, cremation in urns, a lot of people were practicing cremation deposits

that way. But you should look at the details more exactly, such as which types of objects are being deposited for example. And when it comes to the species of animals that are present in cremation graves, you also see particularities. If you compare this for example with Lindholm Høje (Ramskou 1976; Høilund Nielsen 2009), the large fifth to tenth century CE cemetery in Northern Jutland, there were lots of cremations. They are also cremating animals, but of different species than in Ribe. They cremated mostly dogs, whereas at Ribe, we only have three examples of this (Croix 2023). So, these are important variations to observe across regions if you can get down to that level of detail.

For the inhumation graves, if you go down to a certain level of detail, you will start to see finer variation there too. The inhumations at Ribe seem generally very simple. They are earth-dug 'trench' graves, from what we can tell. The deceased are placed in semi-flexed or fully flexed positions. Their orientation is especially interesting, as it seems that heads are mostly placed towards the south. In the cases where we have west-east orientations, the head is at the west end. That compares quite well with what you find in the Saxon and Frisian regions (see Knol, this volume). I should mention here that it is very difficult to contextualise Ribe with the rest of Denmark because there are very few burial finds from the eighth century CE with only a few large cemeteries and some single graves. But based on what we know, inhumation graves in the eastern part of Denmark were north-south oriented with the head to the north. Such a trait is very helpful to contextualise and find similarities and discrepancies across regions.

One of the most spectacular finds from Ribe's pre-Christian cemetery is that of a horse burial, which was radiocarbon dated to the eighth century CE. The horse was interred with a saddle, harness and all associated fittings, a knife, as well as a dog. The horse was afforded their own grave: there was no human associated with the burial. Sadly, there was also a pit house, probably about a hundred years younger, which partly cut this grave and made it difficult to establish whether there could have been another grave it had some connection to. At the same time, it could very well have been an independent animal burial. One can imagine that some animals were perhaps conceived as their own social person that received their own burial. But obviously, we can't be sure due to the degree of disturbance at the site. For the harness and saddle, the closest parallels were found at the cemetery of Rullstorf, near the River Elbe in Lower Saxony (Hörning 1993; Gebers 2004). This site is contemporary to Ribe's cemetery and also combines cremation, inhumation, and grave marking with ring ditches. It also has animal burials, including a horse inhumation with extremely similar gear. So, both in the practice of inhumation and down to the level of detail

of the harness, there is clear comparability between the horse burial finds at the two sites.

Animals and death

FL: I am really interested in the comparability of animal species in cremations that you just mentioned, and I wondered if we can theorise about human-animal relationships by looking at this data as well as the burials of dogs, horses and other animals alongside humans?

SC: It's extremely interesting trying to shift the focus from the human in burial practices to the things around the human (Croix 2023). Animals are often lumped into the 'thing-group' with artefacts and other forms of material deposits. But one may wonder what the different roles of animals were in the context of burial. Of course, there are hundreds of possible interpretations, ranging from the pragmatic to the more symbolic. Interpreting these remains pragmatically as food for the deceased or even for those attending the funeral is one way to go. But being able to look at species and even at which parts of the animals were involved is an important step in moving towards a more symbolic interpretation. This is a very difficult step, as we are used to thinking of animals in utilitarian terms as a kind of food.

Of course, there are issues of preservation here too, and the matter of the selection of remains from the pyre prior to deposition. But even looking at which part of the animal is present in the cremated remains is already very informative. At Ribe, it was mostly in cremations that animals were involved. Where the part of the animal that is present in the cremation deposits is one that is usually consumed, it is easy to go to the most obvious explanation and see animals as sources of food. But then, the majority of cremations in Ribe contain bird bones. These are difficult to work with as they are very brittle, especially when cremated. And you need to think about how selectively these cremains were removed from the pyre and those issues of representativity. But there still is a pattern of deposition of small birds, probably mostly Wadden sea birds. In some cases, only one wing was placed (or retrieved from the pyre) and redeposited. So, I have tried to see if there was any variation in who was cremated and buried with these types of animals. And it seems all kinds of people could receive this bird element in their mortuary treatment. From there, I thought about how to push the interpretation forward. Foremost, it is really interesting that the birds were restricted to the cremation graves. And they are mixed with the human bones in the cremation deposits, which of course, applies to other animal bones too. And the question here is if that is again practical or much more intentional. I'm really interested in this combination of the fragmented human with the fragmented animal: how humans and animals

were merged in the depositional process. Then, what this could mean, well, a world of interpretation is open to us there.

HW: It's such a shame that some insist on these functional explanations when so much more interesting topics are at hand: human-animal relationships, as you address in your work, Sarah. And just imagine these animals would have made a massive difference to how the pyre would have looked like.

SC: This reminds me of some of the discussions we had about one of the richest cremation graves, which had wing bones from six different ducks. And the point came up that these might have been part of the dress of the person. In this case, the osteological analysis pointed to a possible female individual, and the finds concurred. Feathers are very colourful and beautiful, and they might be ornamental – at least to our eyes. But this does not fit with the occurrence of the same type of bird bones in children's and adult male's graves. Ornamentation is the 'easy' explanation: a well-dressed woman with glass beads, jewellery and feathers.

FL: Our discussion really reminds me of the 'flat-ontology' theories that are gaining more popularity amongst archaeologists, for example, in the work of Rachel Crellin (2020). They basically argue that humans are not at the core of change and ascribe more and more equality of agency to objects and animals. So why should animals be there purely for food or ornamentation, why not think of what other roles they might have held in life as well as during death rituals?

Grave goods: cremation versus inhumation

HW: What are your thoughts on the differences between cremations and inhumations in terms of furnishings (cremations are more richly furnished!) and their associated status? How do you view the debate around burial forms, furnishings and status?

SC: Cremation burials at Ribe tend to be slightly better furnished than inhumation burials. Generally, I don't think furnishings are necessarily good proxies for studying social status. There are exceptions, of course, like the incredibly wealthy Viking-period inhumation graves such as the famous Oseberg ship-burial, which is clearly for people of very high social status. The grave shows obvious elements of expenditure in the mortuary treatment, which you don't do just for anyone. But I don't think it necessarily works the other way around: I wouldn't say that a grave with few or no furnishings is necessarily a low-status person. This is an issue to

discuss further: how we approach social diversity and inequalities in a community based on burial furnishings. This tradition of interpretation has long been critiqued and it is problematic.

As an aside, I should mention that I am part of a project called 'Gendering the Nordic past' at the University of Oslo. And I have contributed to an upcoming volume with a paper on what happens if you try to discuss burials from a gendered perspective without looking at grave goods (Croix forthcoming). The reality is that for Viking Age Denmark, the majority of burials have no grave goods. Or if they have grave goods they are non-gender specific: a knife, or a whetstone. The portion of the buried population that is gendered, is maybe 10–15%. So, what does that mean in gender-terms? Can you really talk about gender identities of a whole society based on 15% of graves? I think that's the same with status. You can't have a whole society of slaves buried in simple graves without grave goods!

HW: If I may say: this might seem obvious to you because you are working with material that prompts your questions. How many other archaeologists dealing with burial data, or people who are not like yourself, who have come from a settlement perspective, still talk about burial data in terms of social stratification? And I think you are more attentive to the problems because you have worked with settlement data and are used to dealing with fragmentary datasets. And yet that doesn't seem to be percolating through.

SC: It is exactly an attempt at doing that, confronting a methodological pattern. There is another aspect, which is the state of publications of new materials. A lot of work is being done on the same set of well-known, well-published, furnished burials. Also, because a lot of those more modest burials may come from the large number of rescue excavations that have been going on for the last twenty years. Those have created a lot of data that no one really looks at because they are not the fancy graves, and they remain largely unpublished.

Cremation and Christianisation

HW: There might be a rather abrupt end to the Ribe cemetery containing cremation and inhumation burials. In Croix (2017), you tentatively suggest that the Christian cemetery that is started elsewhere in the emporium might have something to do with that. Do you see this abrupt end of cemeteries and switch to Christian cemeteries elsewhere in the region?

SC: The Ribe case is quite particular. We know from historical sources about Christian missions to South Scandinavia in the eighth and early ninth century, as well as the construction of a church in Ribe which could very well be



Figure 5.2: Preservation conditions for uncremated bone remains are generally very poor at Ribe's pre-Christian cemetery. While some bone matter may be present, parts of the skeleton may be recognised as darker stains in the sandy soil, as in grave G19, SJM 348 K263 (Photograph by Aarhus University/Museum of Southwest Jutland)

connected to the dating of the other cemetery identified ten years ago. That cemetery is interpreted as a Christian cemetery, and, I think, rightly so. Ribe has this continuity of settlement throughout the period during which the two cemeteries are in use, which means you can see the development of the mortuary landscape in the long term. The abruptness of the shift, going from a pre-Christian to a Christian cemetery, is difficult to assess when we can't really date what the youngest graves at the pre-Christian site would be, as we know the upper levels of the site are likely truncated. What we can see is pit houses being constructed on the pre-Christian cemetery site, sometimes even on top of graves. The coins from these structures date them to the middle of the ninth century CE onwards. This coincides rather well with the establishment of the Christian cemetery in the area where the cathedral of Ribe is today.

To situate this question in a broader context, it is not unusual that settlements are being established or extend

over older graves. It happens in Hedeby, and later on around the year 1000 at Lindholm Høje. There doesn't seem to have been a taboo about a privileged use of this place for burials, or the taboo had been lifted making it possible to build on top of graves. The question is: was the memory lost, had so much time passed that the new users had forgotten who was there? Or was the memory broken in the sense that they didn't care about those buried people? I'm not sure whether it is necessarily an intentional erasure of their past, like a Christian reaction to an undesirable, pre-Christian, pagan past. It might just be that the buried population weren't considered as 'their dead' anymore, and the living didn't care anymore. That could be religiously motivated. I'm quite convinced that not much time had passed between the abandonment of the pre-Christian cemetery and the establishment of the pit houses connected to a new use of this space for settlement. I don't think people would have forgotten that there had been a cemetery there. Some graves were marked with barrows, small but probably still visible. People would have known what the area had been used for just a few decades before. I'm not sure they were erasing it, but perhaps they didn't feel it belonged to them anymore.

Explaining cremation

FL: An anecdote about several archaeological sites details that were discovered partly because of persisting local oral traditions that pointed towards certain areas as 'areas of the dead' or where ghosts dwell. Sometimes spanning centuries: for example, the Late Iron Age/early medieval cemetery of Ii in Finland (Kuusela 2013).

I'm thinking of your graves without any bones in them and I am reminded, although preservation needs to obviously be kept in mind, of some suggestions by Roman scholars that such empty tombs could represent the graves of people fallen in faraway battles and other scenarios where the corpse could not be retrieved: cenotaphs. With Ribe being a highly connected place, could there be a comparison there as well? In such environments, might people being lost at sea, not returning, and having a symbolic burial for them have served to materially anchor the dead in the world?

SC: My first reaction would be to say that it has a lot to do with preservation. Bone is generally really poorly preserved within a broad spectrum from bad to worse. Sometimes bone crumbles or has a butter-like texture, making it increasingly challenging to preserve. Corpse-shadows, in Danish 'ligskygge', are often found in Denmark as well: essentially the only thing left of the decomposing body. The soil in Ribe is very sandy, and so this darker fatty shadow contrasts very nicely with the light sand around it. You can sometimes see how the body was positioned! (Figure 5.2) The head, for example, leaves a darker outline,

which is quite useful. That is to say, even when there is no preserved bone, it is sometimes evident that a body was there. But sometimes, there is indeed nothing at all. I would ascribe this to poor preservation, but I like the idea you offer. It is a maritime community, it was well connected, and people would have travelled far and wide: so it would be a nice explanation. To back it up, however, I would perhaps have liked to see something in the grave, almost to mark the absence of the body: a personal object or a surrogate: an animal, for example.

Cremation and mythology

HW: Your work has linked myth and archaeology. What are some of the challenges of this approach, and what are some benefits?

SC: I'm partially trained as an historian, which means I have been trained to be very source-critical. It also means that, even as an archaeologist, I always try and think if there are any textual sources for the time and place I'm interested in that would make sense to utilise. Generally, I don't think there are any bad sources; it's a matter of which questions you put to them. For eighth-/early ninth-century CE Ribe I think it's really difficult to find anything solid as primary source for discussing the burial practices. There is nothing direct enough to serve as a primary source. But on the other hand, there are other textual accounts which may act as inspiration or as a way of gaining some perspective rather than as primary material. For one paper, I looked at old-English poems. In my mind, the North-sea region is all so connected that it might make more sense to look at those sources than it would looking at the Poetic Edda, for example, which is more distant in both time and space. The Icelandic sources, which might in this context be a bit far away, might not serve as primary source but I like to have them in mind as inspiration, as a way of trying to think beyond my own immediate thought. There is always a trap when getting to the interpretation stage of an analysis, where it is hard to avoid interpreting facts according to one's own social values and mindset. Textual sources give you an opportunity to reflect and think about alternatives.

Future directions

FL: What new ideas are offering fresh avenues for the study of Late Iron Age/early medieval cremation practices and their relationship with other disposal methods?

SC: What you were bringing up earlier, about flat ontology and human-animal relationships and anything that breaks down the human individual as the centre of everything. In terms of understanding cremation practices, what happens to the body in that process and the relation between being a person and a body is particularly important: are those two

the same things? Also, the notion of the individual is very modern. Is your body yours? Are you your own person? What is your 'self' in all that? All those perspectives on personhood and the body and the integrity of the body are inspiring, and the question of what forms life may take as well. Is biological life the only form of life, if we think about how things and materials have been thought to be able to animate and act in various cultures? This could bring a lot to understanding cremation research.

FL: Exactly! Anna Wessman addresses the dispersed and collective nature of some cremations in Finland. What that could tell us about the way these people perceived personhood and how it is transformed after death.

HW: What methodological advances, new discoveries or excavation methods do you see influencing the study of late Iron Age/early medieval cremations in the foreseeable future in your research areas?

SC: First of all, acknowledging the validity of looking at cremations as an important part of studying mortuary practices on equal footing with inhumations would already be a huge step to take. Generally, high-definition approaches are really important in archaeology. There is a real need for refined chronologies for burial practices on much larger scales, and there is already much progress in that direction. Being able to date cremated bone, but also to establish finer chronologies using radiocarbon dating methods has been crucial. Cremation burials potentially represent a huge dataset which has not been used in this way outside of Anglo-Saxon England (see chapters by Squires and Perry). There is so much potential in aligning and problematising the discussion on a shift from cremation to inhumation under the influence of Christianity (or other factors) within the North-Western European sphere. Can you place that shift in time, really? How do you explain internal dynamics within cemeteries without fine chronologies? Are communities changing from cremation to inhumation over time, or are they practicing both at the same time? It is extremely important to our interpretation if we can trace this on a larger scale. The source material is available, it is just a matter of compiling it. Another wish, which will probably remain an unfulfilled aspiration for a while, is the possibility of aDNA sequencing for cremated remains. So far, it has not worked but I hope science will catch up (see Veselka this volume)! There are so many questions to answer regarding the changes from one form of burial to the other: is it migration, or are these people biologically related to each other and yet deal with each other's bodies in such distinct ways?

Conclusion

FL: Is there anything you would like to add to what we've talked about?

SC: Well, I want to express an encouragement that we continue to explore early medieval cremation practices. The chronological dimension is important, both within cemeteries and across regions, but I also think getting a broader, geographical comparative perspective as this volume points towards is really exciting.

A cross-European approach (and a future joint project?) would also make a lot of sense, especially in terms of aligning and advancing dating methodologies. In 2017 I gave a paper at the EAA in Maastricht about the Ribe finds titled 'Wonders from scratch': cremation burials may be rather unseemly, but with a high-definition approach combining archaeology and the natural sciences, they can deliver a wealth of information furthering our understanding of such a complex funerary process.



Figure 5.3. A Mayen-ware pitcher was reused as an urn for the cremains of a c. two-year-old child. The burial is dated to the eighth century and the pitcher was retrieved perfectly preserved during excavation in 2015 despite more than a thousand years of occupation at the site (Photograph by Aarhus University/Museum of South-West Jutland)

Key data: South-West Jutland

Where do cremations occur in Ribe and its surrounding area, and when do they date to?

Cremations in Ribe only occur at the pre-Christian cemetery, which is located to the east of the dense settlement area that forms the core of the emporium. They are all dated to the eighth (perhaps late seventh) to around the middle of the ninth century CE. There are not many burial grounds contemporary to Ribe's in the surrounding area, although the mortuary landscape of the region is comparatively better documented than for most of the Jutish peninsula (Kleiminger 1993: 95–104; Gerds and Wolf 2015: 63). Within a c. 30km radius, six sites have been recorded up to 2016. Some only have single grave-finds, while three (Bavnehøj/Store Darum, Tjæreborg and Bryndum) are larger (Nielsen 1984; Nielsen 1998; Stoumann 2009; Eisenschmidt 2004; Jensen 2016a; Jensen 2016b). Overall, cremation is the dominating practice in the eighth–early ninth century, although inhumation is also attested.

What relationship existed between inhumation burials and cremation burials in your research area? Do they occur on the same site or even in the same grave context? Do they have similar items deposited with them?

Both cremation and inhumation are practised at Ribe's pre-Christian cemetery. Instances of stratigraphic relations between burials of either type are few but show no strict chronological development – cremations can be younger than inhumations, while inhumations are the only practice attested in one isolated part of the site which is still in use in the tenth century CE. Inhumation, unsurprisingly, is the only practice attested at the Christian cemetery at Lindegården, south of the emporium, which was established after the mid-ninth century CE (Søvsø 2012). As inhumations at the pre-Christian cemetery are very poorly furnished, their material is hardly comparable to the relatively better-furnished cremations. One inhumation burial contained a pair of tweezers, a folding knife, and a regular knife, which was bent before deposition. These elements are also encountered in a couple of cremation burials, which suggests that the material culture these people used went across their preferences for certain burial treatments.

In the surrounding area, inhumation and cremation are both attested at Bavnehøj/Store Darum where inhumations occurred in two phases, but the chronological relationship between the early inhumation phase to the eighth-century CE cremations is unclear. Bryndum is an inhumation-only cemetery, which may date to the late eighth–ninth century CE, while Tjæreborg is cremation-only and dates to the eighth–ninth century CE. The overall picture in the local area is that cremation is eventually replaced by inhumation during the

course of the Viking period, but at different times and without a clear linear trajectory.

The funerary finds in the region are predominantly cremation deposits in urns with only sparse object depositions. Richer deposits include glass beads, folding knives, combs, and riding equipment.

In what quantities do cremations occur in your research area?

Forty-four features have been interpreted as cremation graves at Ribe's pre-Christian cemetery. Forty-two are securely identified, while two are disturbed by later activity and therefore dubious. This number represents nearly half of the one hundred features associated with the cemetery, with inhumations being equally represented. Bavnehøj/Store Darum and Tjæreborg are the two sites with the largest number of cremations in the local area, containing 14 and 12, respectively.

In what forms are cremations deposited in your research area? Are there any indications of pyres?

In Ribe's pre-Christian cemetery, the majority of cremations occur as cremation deposits in pits (29 ex.). There are also four instances of surface deposits, preserved as smaller patches nested in natural, shallow depressions. Cremation deposits in urns are also attested with nine examples. No pyre sites could be securely identified. This may be due to the state of preservation of the site, where the upper levels have probably been truncated in several areas, or to the fact that it is not entirely excavated – pyres may have been located in the periphery, in areas currently under modern houses. The deposits themselves did often contain some charcoal, but in most cases, there seems to have been an effort made to retrieve the bone cremains and the artefacts to form the actual deposits.

What types of containers are associated with cremations? (For example: Urns, wooden containers, leather pouches?)

The use of containers is only clearly attested for deposits in urns. These are all ceramic vessels, mostly local grey ware pots. A single find stands out: a Mayen-ware pitcher, intact and used for depositing the cremains of a c. two-year-old child (Croix *et al.* 2020b) (Figure 5.3). Perhaps one deposit had originally been placed into the ground in some kind of organic container, as it was both rather small and well delimited. However, preservation conditions for non-fired organic materials are very poor at the site, and whether this was the case could not be determined. The majority of cremation deposits seem more loosely gathered into pits.

When objects occur with cremations, what type of objects are they? (do they tend to be burnt or unburnt?)

Although burial furnishings are not particularly abundant in Ribe, it seems that most equipment in cremations is either personal implements or dress accessories. Most common are combs and glass beads. There are also knives and some examples of metal fittings (brooches, belt-buckles). More rarely, there are also examples of tools (spindle-whorls, saw, shears) as well as keys and casket fittings. Finally, there is a single example of metal harness fittings for horse riding. This pattern is very similar to that encountered in northern Frisia and Belgium (see Knol and Annaert, this volume) but contrasts with that of Poland and Finland (see Gardela, chapter 2 and Wessman, both this volume).

Are there funerary monuments or other structures surrounding cremations in your research area?

There are no funerary monuments preserved in elevation at Ribe's pre-Christian cemetery. However, there are six certain and one probable circular ditches, which probably originally encircled small barrows raised over cremation deposits. The ditches are c. 5–6.5m in diameter, with a single one double this size, which gives an idea of the dimensions of the barrows. One cremation deposit was recorded within one of the circular ditches, and cremated remains were retrieved from the fill of another ditch.

Is there any noteworthy spatial patterning of cremation burials on the sites they occur on?

Ribe's pre-Christian cemetery covered an estimated area of 8–9ha. Across this area, the documented burials do not show any spatial patterning, except for a small cluster of

younger inhumation burials in the southern part of the site, probably dating to the tenth century CE. Throughout the site, cremations and inhumations seem to mingle. No clustering according to cremation type (in urn, in pit, on the surface) could be discerned either.

What trends can be observed regarding the occurrence of cremation burials throughout time in your research area?

Cremation occurs within a one hundred to one hundred fifty years timespan in Ribe, and finer chronological developments are a little hazardous to establish. It seems that cremation deposits in urns belong mainly to the first half of the eighth century CE, based on a combination of radiocarbon dates and bead-type chronology. Cremation deposits in pits seem, on the other hand, to cover the entire use-life of the site.

Where osteological data is available, is there any apparent selection of deceased according to their sex or age?

Bone material was preserved from sixty-three of the eighty-eight human burials at the pre-Christian cemetery in Ribe. The osteological analysis was able to propose sex and age estimates for sixty-one and twenty-six individuals, respectively. These uneven figures are due to the relatively poor degree of preservation of human remains, which, although for different reasons, apply to both cremation and inhumation burials. In both cases, however, teeth were often sufficiently preserved to allow age assessment, while the overall partial representation of the bodies limited sex assessment to a greater extent.

There does not appear to be any preferential burial treatment depending on age and sex. Individuals from all age groups and from both biological sexes could be inhumed or cremated; the same applies to the different types of cremation as well.

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Cremation in Northern Germany: from the Bronze Age to the Viking Age

Helene Agerskov Rose

Cremation is prevalent over the longue durée in northern Germany from the Bronze Age period II to the Viking period. This interview explored both continuities and variabilities in cremation practices and their use alongside inhumation practices. New methods and interpretative approaches to cremation practices and cemetery spaces are considered, drawing on recent original research on Early Iron Age cremation practices in the region.

Urnfields; continuity; complex funerary practices; radiocarbon dating; strontium isotope analysis

Introduction

Femke Lippok: Could you introduce yourself and your work relating to Iron Age and later cremation burials in the context of your other work?

Helene Agerskov Rose: I'm a prehistoric archaeologist and I specialise in mortuary archaeology. Also, I have expertise in scientific dating. Looking back over the last few years, I've been primarily focused on the burial practices in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age in northern Europe, which in this period means cremation graves. My work has been twofold. I've been focused on chronology using scientific methods where I developed a statistical model for wood age offsets, sometimes called the 'old wood effect' in cremated bone. This is highly relevant to radiocarbon dating cremated bone. The other element of my work is tackling what is called the 'Hallstatt plateau' of the radiocarbon calibration curve which I explore using Bayesian statistics. Parallel to this more scientific package of approaches I have been studying mortuary practices using more 'traditional' archaeological methods both during my doctoral research focused on cremation burials in southern Denmark and then later in the URNFIELD project.

The URNFIELD project came to be based on some observations during my PhD. Working with the 'urnfield phenomenon' in Denmark, it is often described as this particularly Danish phenomenon centred in southern Jutland. Yet, because I was based in Schleswig, Germany at this point, I knew this wasn't the case. In fact, there are many more examples in Schleswig-Holstein, particularly in Holstein, of similar burial practices. At the archive in Schleswig at the Archaeological Museum, they have more than 30,000 graves from the Iron Age, most of these being cremations (Gebühr 2007). They really have a huge body of data! Research in this region into the cremation burials of the Early Iron

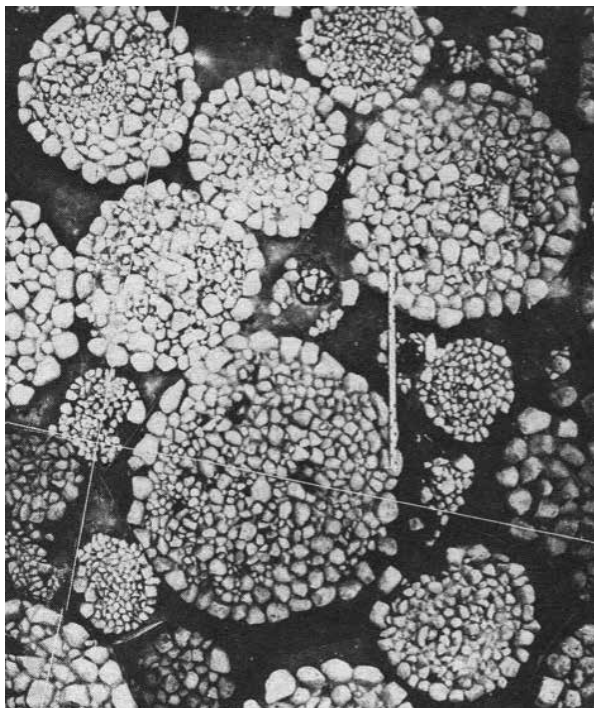


Figure 6.1: Examples of stone pavings at the cremation cemetery Groß Timmendorf (after Hingst 1989, Karte 6a)

Age has a long history going back to the work of Professor Johanna Mestorf (1886). She was first the curator, later the director, of the Museum Vaterländische Altertümer in the late nineteenth century which later became the state museum for Schleswig Holstein based at Schloss Gottorf in Schleswig (Koch and Mertens 2002). This led me to establish the urnfield project as a collaboration between Danish and Germany partners. From there, we established a network of like-minded academics and researchers from across North Europe, both through sessions at the European Association for Archaeologists and an online symposium (during COVID). It became clear how many similarities there are across northern Europe but also some real differences. We have compiled all these contributions into a large edited volume showing similarities and differences across most of northern Europe in this time period (Rose *et al.* 2023). It was a priority to publish it in English to ensure a broader international audience given that many publications have been disseminated in German, Danish, Polish and Dutch and are otherwise unavailable.

FL: There are clear similarities with our project: attempting to explore parallels and contrasts across traditional boundaries in research.

Howard Williams: Yes, we've come across the linguistic, national and specialist periodisation divides and we an-

ticipated them, but some remain stark and we still have areas where we have gaps but equally our project has been able to chart themes connecting areas otherwise studied in isolation. If you were going to capture a general description of the changing burial landscape of northern Germany from the Early Iron Age through to the Late Iron Age (early medieval period), what would it be?

HAR: The mortuary landscapes of northern Germany have a continuous character so I must go back to the Neolithic to begin this sketch. In the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, when northern Germany was the southernmost part of the Nordic Bronze Age orbit, huge barrows were constructed. They are also found elsewhere in northern Europe. And the most famous of these is perhaps the Egtved Girl from Denmark (Kristiansen and Larsson 2005). But if we shift to the fourteen century BCE we start to see cremation burials within these barrows. In the earliest phase the existing tradition are continued – cremations being interred in oak log coffins, but within two centuries cremations start to be interred in urns or pits, although still within the same barrows (Schaefer-Di Maida 2023: 323–327). From c. 1500 BCE, we don't find inhumations anymore; they've switched completely to cremation (Rose *et al.* 2024). Cremation remained the dominant disposal method for the next two thousand years in northern Germany, making it a really long stretch that we only have cremations from.

Moving through the Bronze Age they continued to use these barrows for secondary cremation, either in the barrows or around them. However, moving up to the end of the Bronze Age and into the beginning of the Pre-Roman Iron Age, c. 500 BCE, we have new cremation cemeteries being established, although often maintaining close spatial links to older burial monuments. These new cemeteries were used for many centuries resulting in some becoming really large and containing several thousand burials. We also have some smaller burial grounds of c. fifty to one hundred burials. One of the largest is the cemetery at Müllen Eichen in Mecklenburg which had around 5000 burials dating from just before the Pre-Roman Iron Age, c. 600 BCE and reaching into the early Roman Iron Age, c. 100 CE (Ettel 2014). If we consider that despite the large number of graves only a few of these overlap or intercut, this shows us that they must have been visible on the surface. Either through different forms of stone settings, but we suspect there might have been some form of organic burial marker equivalent to a wooden cross today. We know that stones played a vital role in funerary architecture below-ground and above-ground, either in the form of standing stones inserted into the grave, stone settings around the grave, or cover-stones placed over graves. Or in the form of stone circles or circular stone pavements, or combinations of each, as can



Figure 6.2: Urn and burials goods from cremation grave 12 from Pinneberg-Ratsberg. The weapon equipment and a silver inlaid equestrian spur mark it as an elite burial dating to the Late Roman Iron Age (photograph by C. Janke, copyright Museum für Archäologie Schloss Gottorf, Stiftung Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig)

be observed at Groß Timmendorf (Figure 6.1; Hingst 1989). Stones however lose their significance in the Late Iron Age where we only find them in a minority of graves.

HW: So what happens in the later Iron Age, from the Migration Period onwards? Do they get abandoned or continue?

HAR: Actually, many of these large cremation cemeteries continue to be in use into the Roman Iron Age and some even into the Migration Period, but in the second century CE we also start to see inhumation appearing again. It has been suggested that it was introduced by external influences: either from the Danish area to the north, where we see inhumations emerging from the second century BCE, or from the south, perhaps via soldiers returning from service in the Roman Empire. Inhumation remains the minority practice, and cremation persists as the principal mode of treatment for the dead. Larger cremation cemeteries continue in use but smaller ‘mixed-rite/bi-ritual’ cemeteries continue side-by-side through to the first half of the ninth century CE when we have the very last cremation graves. Resulting in a long period in which both disposal methods were available and considered valid choices for disposing of the dead.

HW: So we have the mode of disposal shifting but cremation remains dominant, and we have the location of burial continuing with some fluctuations. But what of the cremation ritual itself: is there any demonstrable shift in the treatment of the dead through the centuries? Also, were communities perhaps aware of the time-depth of their tradition, either through remembering or witnessing the earlier graves, and maintained similar practices?

HAR: The cremation practice itself is very much the same but what is put in the grave varies over time. In the Pre-Roman Iron Age, only one third of the graves contained any artefacts, and it is mainly personal dress accessories that were placed with the dead: pins, brooches and belt equipment. Later, we see weapons being placed in some graves including spearheads and knives, such as at the Pinneberg-Ratsberg cemetery dating to the start of the Late Roman Iron Age (Figure 6.2; Abegg-Wigg 2021). Occasionally weapons were bent to fit into the urn.

Moving on in time into the second and third centuries CE, the weapons disappear from the graves which is seen as related to the centralisation of power. Weapons were no longer personal belongings and therefore not disposed of with the dead (Schlotfeldt 2016). Perhaps the

ruling class controlled weapons, and this is reflected in the burials. We also have more elite burials at this time, for example the princely graves from Neudorf-Bornstein (Abegg-Wigg 2014). Some of these high-status graves are inhumations, some are cremations. We cannot see burial differentiation in the choice of mode of disposal: both inhumation and cremation were valid and acceptable choices for disposing of the dead.

FL: So it seems that with the urnfields of the Iron Age, people's burial practices are similar over the large area?

HAR: Northern Europe is not part of the Bronze Age 'Urnfield Culture'. The urnfields of northern Germany and southern Jutland is a geographically and chronologically distinctive phenomenon occurring from c. 800 BCE – much later than in Central Europe. There are clear connotations to the earlier Urnfield Culture but how that link was communicated and brought along with the funerary ideas is very unclear. I think a lot of research interests have been focused on finding the earliest evidence of the Urnfield Culture – where did the phenomenon start – rather than the later parts of it and whether it moved north, or a separate tradition developed in northern Europe (Cavazzuti *et al.* 2022). After all, it need not have come from somewhere southward: we must at least entertain that it might have been separately occurring inventions.

FL: This sharing of burial rites over large distances, do you think that stops at a certain point in time?

HAR: German archaeology is traditionally focused on 'cultural groups' following the culture-historical approach (e.g. Brandt and Rauchfuss 2014), but there is a slow move towards talking more about chronological periods and not relying so strongly on the cultural aspects. The different areas are certainly inspiring each other and there is a lot of overlap which has led to describing some areas as being 'peripheries' to other areas. Research into centres versus peripheries does not necessarily give us a lot of new information about the nature of shared mortuary practices across larger distances. Funerary rites are linked to the religious sphere, which is really the identity 'core' of a society, and how people from a different society – with a different identity – might be inspired to take over part of something so important is really interesting and requires further research. Incorporating new funerary rites is a fundamental change in comparison to changes in material culture, such as introducing a new type of pin or knife, but we can see they did both, it is just not clear how and why.

The political landscape of northern Germany becomes more dynamic in the Roman Iron Age and the fluctuating cultural groups or tribes adopt different funerary rites as expressions of their identity, leading to a more diverse

funerary landscape in the Late Iron Age and Viking Age. Based on differences in funerary rites, material culture and in part on written sources we know that the west coast of Schleswig was inhabited by Friesians who practised predominantly cremation, whereas inhumations were more frequent on the east coast that was under a strong Scandinavian influence where inhumations were more common (Eisenschmidt 2004: 298–302).

HW: So how are German archaeologists contending with this data and the continuity of traditions in ritual technology and cemetery spaces. Is this seen as 'just so' and reflecting a long-term inhabited landscape, or is it seen as an aspect of memory or even the power and importance of ancestors?

HAR: If we move to Haithabu – this Viking Age emporium – here we know from the written sources that we have different ethnic groups living in the settlement at the same time and there the diversity of disposal methods and grave types have been suggested as reflecting the ethnic groups (Eisenschmidt 2004: 301–302). However, most of these graves do not have grave goods and so it is difficult to demonstrate the link archaeologically. A similar point was made by Croix in this volume.

FL: I have a side question. As you were describing the long-term burial landscape with both cremation and inhumation, in terms of cremation, in the Early Middle Ages they are very often one burnt person and rarely two or three or more in the same grave. Is this true compared with the earlier Iron Age burials where there are more multiple burials? Does this show an increased focus on individualism?

HAR: In most cases, cremation burials are for one person. However, we already know from anthropological analyses that there can be multiple individuals in the same grave, but you have to be quite lucky to see this in order to differentiate these individuals based on osteological observations, for example if a grave contains two of the same ear bones. When this happens, we may assume the individuals were buried together because they died around the same time, but extra pieces of bone might also be included unintentionally if for example a funeral pyre was reused. The Belgian CRUMBEL project has however published some very interesting results that suggest bones may have been curated for several centuries before being buried, and I know they have more instances coming out (see also Wessman, Veselka, Annaert, Ó Ríagáin and Maldonado, this volume). In a recent study Sabaux and colleagues combined osteology, radiocarbon dating and strontium isotope analysis and found surprisingly divergent results within individual

graves (Sabau et al. 2021). Cremated remains from the same grave but from different time periods and with clearly different mobility signatures suggest the presence of multiple individuals. It is becoming increasingly clear that there is much more going on than what we are currently capturing – that the cremation burial practices are much more diverse. What goes through your mind when you are including a fragment of cremated remains of someone who perhaps died one hundred years earlier has to be something significant. Perhaps it even suggests the presence of an ‘ancestor cult’ (or some such phenomenon). I think that’s really interesting and something we are hopefully going to learn more about in the near future.

FL: It highlights the possibilities we have with cremation practices: it becomes possible to readily create one entity from composite beings (as opposed to inhumation).

HAR: We know from other periods that exhumation of skeletonised individuals was going on from the Neolithic and other periods (e.g. the Cladh Hallan mummies: Parker Pearson et al. 2005) – it was a practice in some form so it is not fantastical to imagine that Iron Age people might not have done something similar with curating and co-mingling the cremated dead.

FL: You mentioned cremations in the inhumation coffins in the Bronze Age transitional phase. In the later periods we are discussing – during the Iron Age – do you have cremation and inhumation burials in the same grave contexts?

HAR: We have them from the Bronze Age as with the Egtved Girl inhumation where there was the deposit of a cremated child at the foot of the coffin (Kristiansen and Larsson 2005), but I do not know of any examples after cremation became the dominant practice. Cremated remains in the Bronze Age coffins can be deposited in anatomical order and we occasionally find this also in later periods when we have detailed excavations of the urn (Gramsch and Grosskopf 2003). Whether this was by bringing the urn to the pyre and picking up pieces of cremated bone, starting at the foot end and then moving up along the body until you have restored its anatomical order in the urn. The burial goods – the artefacts – were placed on top. These artefacts were sometimes on the pyre (pyre goods), and sometimes not (grave goods).

FL: Coming at this from a *longue durée* perspective, what are the factors you think we are missing out on if we don’t take this long-term angle. Could you provide an example of what we could be missing if we only look within the early medieval period and not across period boundaries?

HAR: This relates to a general tendency in archaeology that we select a period and we focus on that period, so we become, for example, a ‘Bronze Age specialist’ and you won’t necessarily be interested in what happens in the Iron Age (although see Kneisel 2021). This is particularly problematic given many of the key debates and changes happen at these transitions between periods. If we focus on only one side of such transitions, we cannot give a complete interpretation of the archaeological record! This is built into our discipline and inevitable when focusing on single sites (e.g. Bantelmann 1988; Raddatz 1981). The large and diachronic publications by Willroth (1992) and Eisenschmidt (2004) are among the few but notable exceptions from northern Germany in this period.

FL: Obviously your work is remedying that situation: I am often inspired by prehistoric archaeologists who are more flexible in this regard. Perhaps because of the presence of historical sources, our periodisation dominates our discourse more and close down alternative interpretations. Looking at other periods can allow comparisons and broaden the range of interpretations that might be considered.

HAR: Written sources are not always a blessing, they can create a fixed mindset within academic archaeologists and close down debate.

FL: Especially when our few written sources are composed by elite individuals and might be far from representative of their time, or even aware of practices going on outside their narrow orbits and among many regions.

HAR: And outsiders might not even have the insights we are looking for, so even where and when we have written sources, they won’t be exploring or understanding the motives and contexts of people’s actions.

FL: Exactly, akin to very bad anthropology and from two thousand years ago!

This next question latches onto that nicely. Your research area of northern Germany and moving into Jutland are usually cited as the origin areas of the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ peoples. What is your perspective on the use of historical and archaeological sources, given that it has become something of a ‘myth that’s too big to fail’ from a British perspective in particular? And cremation is central to this debate since cremation practices similar to those from your region are often cited as evidence for the Anglo-Saxon migration (see Squires, Perry and Harland this volume).

HAR: I think it plays a bigger role on the British side of the Channel than it does in German archaeology. It gets

mentioned but it doesn't play a prominent role in archaeological research and interpretations. If we look at the first centuries CE, we do see a clear increase in the population size and the centralisation of power is evidenced (in particular) by the weapon graves disappearing and a new elite becoming visible in the burial record. We can observe a consolidation of power in for example the construction of the Olger Dyke, this at least 12km long linear earthwork built across the Jutland peninsula in the late first century CE (Christensen 2023). The defensive structure is thought to belong to the emerging Angles, who are the people that migrated, at least in part, in the fifth century. Following the migration there is more sparse archaeological evidence and some sites were likely abandoned, in all likelihood reflecting a smaller population, which eventually lead to the collapse of the continental Anglian political formation. The area was not abandoned but does not seem to have fully recovered until the Viking Age and the emergence of the emporia at Haithabu.

FL: Is that reflected in the burial evidence: changing or reducing numbers of graves? Are we finding them at all and are they changing in appearance?

HAR: Before the migration the pattern we see continues right up to the Viking Age so there is no gap, just we have less evidence. Most of the large cremation cemeteries are finally abandoned in the first part of the Migration Period (late fourth-early fifth century CE). Except the cemetery at Libenau that continues to be in use until the ninth century CE (Cosack 1982). We have smaller cemeteries, often closer to the settlements, where we occasionally find both inhumation and cremation burials, such as the cemetery at Kosel-Ost (Eisenschmidt 2004: 558–559).

FL: What are the interpretations of that? Creating smaller cemeteries: does this reflect a changing conceptualisation of communities and relationships with the dead. Why does that move to smaller cemeteries start happening?

HAR: A lot of what is going on reflects the political vacuum after the collapse of the Angle political formation or 'tribe', but we can't really see what is happening. Sometimes we can discern influences from elsewhere which might reflect immigrant groups, such as the Frisians and the Scandinavians. The need to have the dead closer to the living is a really interesting question and we see that happening in Denmark already in the Roman Iron Age where the closer spatial relationship between 'the living' and 'the dead' has been suggested to indicate a growing concern with lineage and individual status in the society (Parker Pearson 1993).

HW: When do we precisely see the end of the 'prehistoric' burial record and is it because of Christianisation in a simple way?

HAR: It becomes messier to see a simple correlation the more we look at the detail. It is a challenge of cause and effect. We do see the end of cremation in northern Germany coinciding with the earliest missionaries. For example, we have the evidence of Ansgar's missionary work in Haithabu in 826 and later in Ribe and Birka, but we don't know how effective his mission was and if it is connected to the decline of cremation practices that we see. When discussing whether a cemetery is 'heathen' or 'pagan' than 'Christian', I find it more helpful to discuss the absence of burial mounds from the Viking Age. Likewise, we have the decline in the deposition of grave goods. We have burial orientation and how cemeteries are internally organised might provide clues. Even the presence of a cemetery enclosure or church can make a difference. These are proxies more connected to the inhumation burials but if we consider this very, very long history of cremation in northern Germany bridging several chronological periods and possibly also breaching religious views, I would be very cautious about interpreting the decline as directly related to Christianisation. Also having at the back of my mind what went on in Ireland with the new evidence of cremation persisting long after Christian conversion (Gleeson and McLaughlin 2021; see Gleeson this volume).

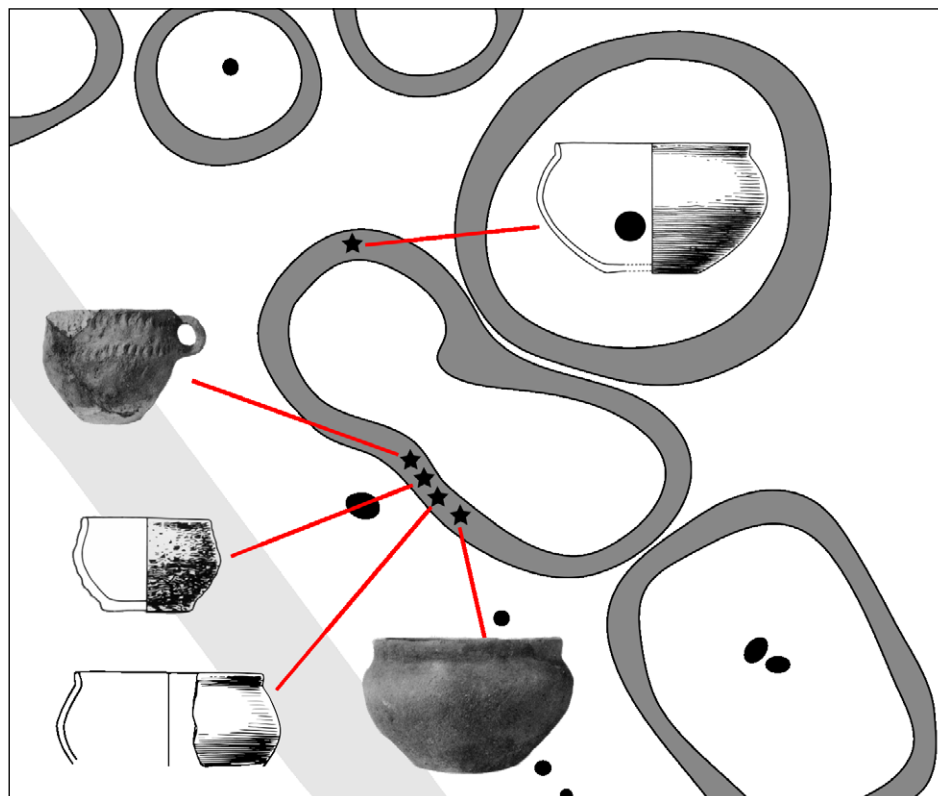
I would also like to add that another factor to this discussion is the poor chronological resolution of a lot of these burials. With a lot of them not containing any artefacts that can be typo-chronologically dated we are left with burial practice. If we have a predefined idea that cremation was abandoned with Christianisation, then we are led to think of cremation burials as probably being earlier, when we wouldn't make the same assumption with an inhumation grave without grave goods. It becomes a self-fulfilling narrative created through confirmation bias that might ignore the messier historical reality.

Future of cremation research

HW: What could the future bring? What is the work that you have been doing that might be applied more broadly and into the late Iron Age/early medieval data? What are the fresh avenues that we might apply to the data?

HAR: I have been really happy to see cremation research move forward within the last few years with an increased focus on the complexity of the funerary practices rather than the previous focus on the apparent simplicity of the graves. I see this change as being carried forward with the improvement in scientific methods, like radiocarbon dating and strontium isotope analysis, but also by

Figure 6.3: Cremation grave from the Late Bronze Age-Early Iron Age cemetery at Sleen, the Netherlands. The grave contained five drinking cups interred in the ring ditch (after Arnoldussen and de Vries 2023; based on Kooi 1979)



changing perspectives of more traditional archaeological approaches (e.g. Louwen 2021). A good example of the latter is a new Dutch study into small drinking cups – they are very lovely – which is a frequent find category in cremation graves across northern Europe (Arnoldussen and de Vries 2023). The cups can either be included in the urn, in the pit or even within the ring ditches surrounding the grave. A single cup might be a personal belonging of the deceased, but there are examples of multiple cups, in one case up to five in one grave (Figure 6.3). The cups are frequently fragmented, which has led Arnoldussen and de Vries to suggest that the cups were part of the mourning practices, either during the funeral itself or later to commemorate the dead. The cups might be used to honour the deceased and afterwards they were ritually ‘killed’ and buried. I find this change of perspectives particularly interesting because it transforms the grave from something very passive to a place that played a far more active and dynamic role during funeral and commemorative rites.

HW: That makes a lot of sense since, even if it isn’t about the same specific artefact types, this approach applies very well to a range of pyre- and grave goods we’ve been discussing across different regions.

FL: In the introduction you mentioned that you have a background in Bayesian statistics and applied this to the

problem of the Hallstatt plateau. This caught my attention because we have a plateau of our own in the fifth century CE. Can we solve this with Bayesian statistics?

HAR: Yes, I think Bayesian statistical modelling can be a viable method applied to address the plateau of radiocarbon dating for fifth century CE contexts. However, I’m unaware of any studies that have attempted it so far. The studies that I know about have selected the later part of the Anglo-Saxon period to avoid this exact plateau. Radiocarbon dating has not been traditionally widely applied in this period. Partly this is because, in many instances, typological dating has been believed to provide much more accurate results. There is other methodological advances that improve our chances of tackling this plateau. The latest Intcal20 calibration dataset has an increased resolution in this period (Reimer 2020) and if we combine this with new calibration curve algorithms and the increased precision of our radiocarbon dates (they are now routinely reported as narrow as ± 25 years) it might be possible to narrow the posterior estimates down to a specific part of the plateau instead of the entire range. Of course, it particularly helps to have strong prior information regarding for example stratigraphy and typological sequences that can help the chronological model narrow the ranges even further. I expect to see these advances come into to play also for the fifth century CE plateau in the next few years.

FL: Is that what Bayesian statistical modelling does? It takes a large number of radiocarbon dates but also other dates from typo-chronology and so on, and tries to make the dating more precise?

HAR: In a nutshell, yes. Instead of eye-balling calibrated dates a Bayesian chronological model can evaluate everything we believe we know and we can run different models to test our data and compare alternative outcomes. The model can for example incorporate prior information on stratigraphy, typology and our information about the material itself, such as if we are dating a tooth of an adult individual. Because the carbon in the tooth were sequestered during childhood, there will be a time delay between childhood and age-at-death, but such an offset can be included in a model. We end up relying on a lot of experts to help guide in the interpretation, including botanic and typological and stratigraphic data. It's really a collaborative endeavour to create these models.

Outlook

FL: Do you have a favourite site, or which site in your research area deserves more attention and why?

HAR: I have two things to say in response to this. First, I would advocate that it is not a specific site but a methodological approach that will bring fresh results. We have these very large and long-running cremation cemeteries that I believe possess great potential for palaeo-demographic studies. We have thousands of men, women and children of all ages and for the first time in north European prehistory we have evidence of a viable burial population. Now, that is not to say that everyone was buried in the cemetery: they were not. We have bog bodies from this period too. However, we do have a very large proportion of the living population being buried in these large cremation cemeteries, in clear opposition to the previous Bronze Age where we only have a fraction of the population buried in a way we can recognise archaeologically. If we then combine the evidence of the funerary practices with the anthropological evidence for the populations, together with high resolution radiocarbon dating and mobility analysis based on strontium isotopes, we have the potential for gaining a broad and unique perspective on life and death in this period. Asking exciting research questions such as if a population was growing? How mortality profiles compare to other populations? If different social groups, including those of different age and sex, received variable mortuary treatment? And even what role the ancestors played in the funerary traditions and in society at large. I see great potential for such future multi-proxy studies of cremation graves.

The second issue is connected to the theme of ancestors and long-term memory. I see the importance

of both concepts, linking the ancestors to the landscape itself, reflected in several features related to the funerary practices, including the layout of burials, the extended use of cemeteries, the extended use of cremation practices, but also in the importance of older burial monuments when establishing new cemeteries. If we apply a chronological scale, we can divide the different examples of memory occurrences into short-term memory, medium-term memory and long-term memory and explore how the three tempos affected and drove forward the cremation practices of northern Germany.

Within short-term memory – spanning a few generations but less than a century – we can observe the importance of maintaining a connection with ancestors within living memory, through the creation of burial groups. These burial groups are clusters of closely spaced graves separated by areas with very few or no graves. The graves are often of very similar type and size and thought to be of similar age. It was apparently very important to belong to the same group and honour the same ancestors. And when I say ‘ancestors’ I don’t just mean genetic ancestors but those connected to a wider social group. It’s here we can see these grave groups.

Within medium-term memory – spanning several centuries but less than a millennium – we can observe the continued importance of being buried in the same places in the same cemeteries for centuries on end. Some of the graves will be those who died within living memory – parents, uncles and aunts and so on. However, there will have been many graves that can only be remembered through the cultural memory of users of that cemetery. And within this time-range we see the continued attention to ‘ancestors’ and claims to belonging in the same ‘ancestor group’. You continue to be cremated as a means of articulating claims to the same ancestor group. Even when inhumation was reintroduced into the repertoire this repeating of cremation is a reiteration of the connection between the past and the present.

Then finally we have the long-term memory – over a millennium – where we can see the inclusion of earlier monuments in the layout of the new cemeteries. Occasionally we can see continuous burials for over a millennium, such as at Mang de Borgen that was in use from the Late Neolithic and well into the Pre-Roman Iron Age. It is a spectacular find, now published (Rose et al. 2024). That’s however an exception and more often a site would have been abandoned before people returned to use it as a burial ground. Here, the question of cremation versus inhumation does not seem to have held a great significance. The people first buried there were long forgotten, and people did not remember who was cremated and who was inhumed. What mattered was the monument and its specific place in the landscape. I would say that the monument itself carries a form of long-term

memory that was communicated forward through time in cultural memory. We can imagine people telling tales about a burial monument that might have belonged to a former Queen or King and by returning and reusing their monument they could then claim these powerful ancestors as their own and thereby legitimise ties to land and other resources.

Concluding remarks

FL: Is there anything else you would like to add?

HAR: We talked about how funerals are part of the religious sphere, but an often overlooked aspect is that cremation is also a practical way of disposing of a dead body. If we imagine that a person died far from home and needed to be transported a long way, then the most practical solution might be to cremate that person. Or it might be a very hard winter and difficult to dig a big grave for an inhumation: then you might choose cremation. Also, after a catastrophic event such as a plague, then it is also a practical way of disposing of large numbers of corpses. I don't think the practical aspect of cremation plays a significant role in periods where it was the dominant practice, but in periods where it was the minority practice, the practical side might have played a larger part in the decision process.

HW: A practical thing about cremation in terms of burial space is that you can place cremation burials closer together. While some cemeteries become large, it allows the dead to be concentrated in burial plots for families or kindreds. Has this 'spatial concentration' been discussed at all?

HAR: In the earlier parts of the Iron Age the cemeteries are separate from the settlement – out in the open landscapes where there are no immediate restrictions to how big they can get. We do however frequently observe burial clusters that has traditionally been interpreted as families, but might also be groups in the society in a much wider sense. At the cremation cemetery at Wachow in Brandenburg we find a rather extreme example of such a cluster, with 93 urns being located within a c. 11 m² area (Domscheit 2023). There's clearly a sense of belonging to the same entity by augmenting it successively with new cinerary urns, which we don't see in the same way with inhumations. So that sense of group belonging is strong in the treatment of the cremated dead and their burial in proximity.

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Key data: Northern Germany

In what quantities do cremations occur in your research area?

Cremations are the majority burial form in the Migration Period (c. 375–600 CE), whereas it becomes the minority burial form in the Viking Age/Early Middle Age (c. 600–1050 CE). At Viking Age Haithabu only around 7% of burials are cremations although the original number of cremations are believed to be higher (Arents and Eisenschmidt 2010: 182).

In what forms are cremations deposited in your research area? Are there any indications of pyres?

German archaeology distinguishes between cremation deposits (German: *Brandschüttungsgräber*) i.e., scattered deposit of cremated human remains and pyre debris, cremation pits (German: *Brandgrabengräber*) i.e., pits containing cremated human remains and pyre debris, and urn graves (German:

Urnengräber), i.e., cremated human remains and possibly pyre debris are interred in a container. All three grave types occur in Northern Germany in the Migration Period and Early Middle Age, although urn graves are by far the most frequent type. Despite the many cremation graves, very few pyres have been identified, although exceptions are the cemeteries at Sörup I (Raddatz 1981: 23–25) and Libenau (Cosack 1982: 10–14). The lack of certain pyres is hardly surprising as experimental archaeology has demonstrated pyres leave scarce impact on the underground, which is unlikely to be recognisable archaeologically a millennium later (Henriksen 2019), leaving pyre architecture to be largely based on ethnographic evidence (Wahl and Wahl 1983). It is however assumed that the pyres were located at the cemeteries based on the frequent inclusion of pyre debris in the graves (Eisenschmidt 2004: 50–51).

What types of containers are associated with cremations? [For example: Urns, wooden containers, leather pouches?]

Predominantly urns in the form of ceramic vessels.

When objects occur with cremations, what type of objects are they? [do they tend to be burned or unburned?]

Most cremation graves contain no objects, but a minority may contain weaponry (swords, shields, spear), jewellery (brooches, pins, chains, glass beads), belt equipment (belt buckles, fittings, strap ends), and other types of personal equipment (iron knives, whetstones, fire flints), and ceramics (both complete vessels and sherds).

Burial goods can both be burned and unburned and there is no clear pattern to what types of object was treated either way (Bantelmann 1988: 73–74).

Are there funerary monuments or other structures surrounding cremations in your research area?

Grave constructions using stones is a widespread phenomenon, although in lesser quantities than in the previous Early Iron Age. Other monument types include mounds (German: *Hügelgräber*), which may be encircled by a ditch (German: *Ringgrab/Kreisgrab*). Occasionally traces of postholes are observed either in the burial pit or just outside it. A single posthole is interpreted as remains of a grave marker, whereas four or more postholes are interpreted as remains of a form of pyre or funerary construction (Arents and Eisenschmidt 2010: 211). It is generally accepted that the graves must have been marked above ground because very few graves intercut, even at cemeteries used consecutively for centuries (Schlotfeldt 2016).

Is there any noteworthy spatial patterning of cremation burials on the sites where they occur?

Many cemeteries that were used from the Late Bronze Age/Pre-Roman Iron Age and into the Migration Period demonstrate some form of horizontal stratigraphy, often taking a starting point from one or more older burial mounds (Schumann 2022). Graves are closely spaced, on average c. 0.5 m in between, although the distance decrease with increasing total number of graves at a site (Schlotfeldt 2016). Grave groups and empty areas occur at most cemeteries, but no obvious spatial patterning of cremation and inhumation graves at mixed cemeteries have been noted.

What trends can be observed regarding the occurrence of cremation burials throughout the post-Roman Iron Age/ early Middle Ages in your research area?

Cremation is a particular long-lasting burial practice in Northern Germany, from the Bronze Age and into the Viking Age, and continues to be practised despite the introduction of inhumation in the Roman Iron Age (see research history by Abegg-Wigg 2023). Cremation is the dominant practice in the western part of Schleswig during the Viking Age, whereas inhumation are more frequent in the eastern part (Eisenschmidt 2004: 267).

Where osteological data is available, is there any apparent selection of deceased according to their sex or age? Are they always individuals or are multiple cremated persons found?

Schwantes (1939) introduced the terms 'Rieste type' for male dominated cemeteries, and 'Darzau type' for female dominated cemeteries from the Late Pre-Roman Iron Age-Roman Iron Age in the Elbgermanic area. It can be difficult to test this when large number of graves contain no burial goods and even if the human remains have been anthropologically analysed (e.g. Schutkowski and Hummel 1991; Wahl 1988), the sex remains unknown for a large proportion of these. The division is likely not as clear cut, although there is evidence of larger cemeteries having separate male and female burial areas (Bantelmann 1988: 76–77).

Most cremation graves contain a single individual, although graves with multiple individuals do occasionally occur. A subset of graves also contains cremated animal bones, interpreted as food offerings or remains from feasting activities (but see Croix and Löffelman, this volume for alternative interpretations).

What relation exists between inhumation burials and cremation burials in your research area? Do they occur on the same site, or even in the same grave context?

Cremation and inhumation appear side by side at some cemeteries from the Late Roman Iron Age onwards, but not in the same grave context.

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Early Medieval Frisia: Cremation Practices Alongside the southern North Sea Coast

Egge Knol

In the fifth century in the Frisian area, along the southern North Sea coast (Province of Friesland and Groningen), people established formal cemeteries. Cremation and inhumation burials were practised at the same time. So far, it is not clear what determined the choice of ritual. At least 117 cemeteries dating to the Early Middle Ages are known, but only a limited number of them are well-recorded. The modern excavation of the Oosterbeintum cemetery together with old observations from Hogebeintum yielded the most useful information. The cremation remains of these cemeteries were examined. Their chronology is partly based on ¹⁴C dates. During the course of the eighth and ninth centuries, the cremation rite disappeared, first in the western part of Frisia, and later in the eastern part too.

Cremation, bustum grave, early medieval cemetery, Oosterbeintum, Hogebeintum, Frisia, marshland, terp

Introduction

Howard Williams: Could you introduce yourself and your work on early medieval cremation practices?

Egge Knol: Since 1994, I've been the curator of archaeology and history at the Groningen Museum in Groningen, but I have maintained my interest in early medieval cemeteries in Frisia, stemming from my PhD research. I have continued publishing on this topic. For my doctoral research, I studied 117 early medieval burial sites in the northern Frisian area, that is, the Dutch provinces of Friesland and Groningen (Knol 1993: 152–154). I made an inventory of all documented graves. For many of these sites, only a couple of graves were preserved: sometimes a single inhumation or only a cinerary urn. A lot of information is very scattered or incomplete. I am sure that quite a lot of sites where we only know of one cremation or one inhumation were actually cemeteries containing many more graves (inhumation, cremation or a mix of both). For the coastal area of the Netherlands and northern Germany, the fifth–early ninth-century cemeteries contain both disposal methods in varied proportions. Our most reliable data from the Netherlands derives from five more-or-less fully excavated cemeteries Hogebeintum, Oosterbeintum, Ezinge

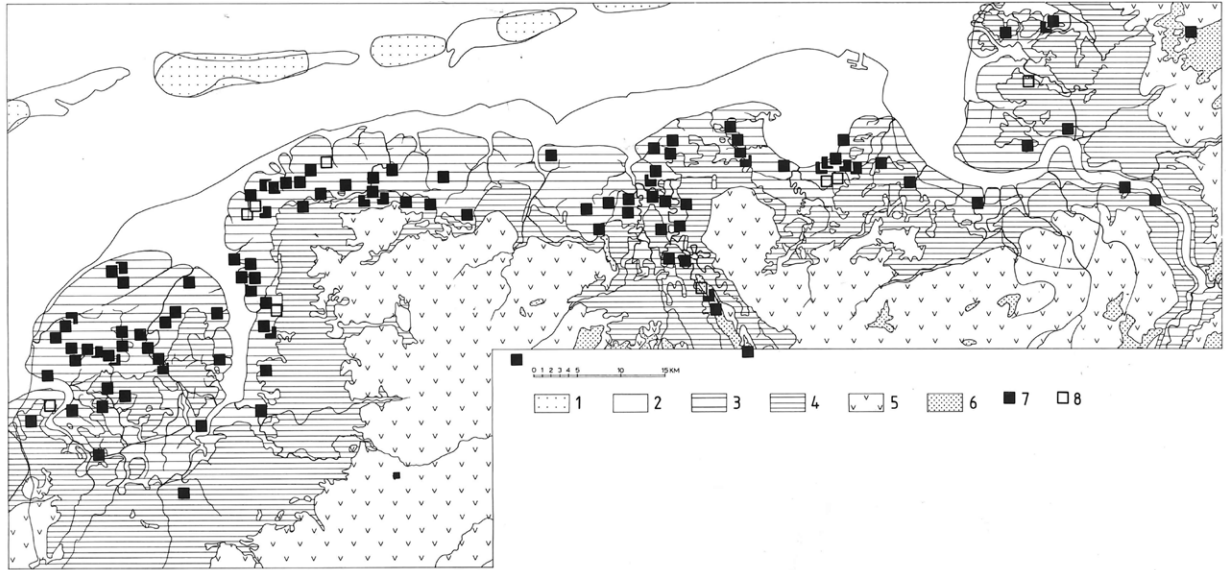


Figure 7.1: Distribution of early medieval cemeteries in the northern coastal area of the Netherlands. This roughly covers the area inhabited in the early medieval period (after Knol 1993) . 1. Bodies of water 2. Beaches and dunes 3. Salt marsh 4. Clay 5. Marsh 6. Pleistocene hinterland 7. Cemetery 8. Possible cemetery.

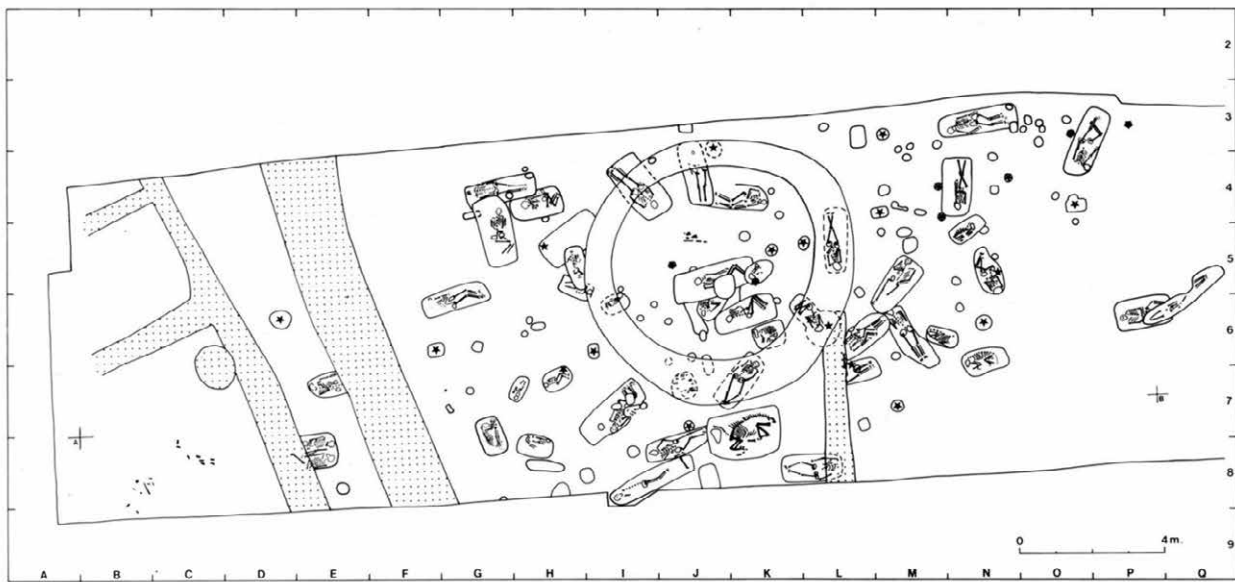


Figure 7.2: The map of the excavated part of the early medieval Oosterbeintum cemetery. The cemetery extended further north and south. Human, dog and horse inhumations were included on this site. The map also shows all the traces of cremation remains. The black dots represent urns (after Knol *et al.* 1996)

De Bouwerd, Paddepoel III and Godlinze and a lot of other scattered information (Knol 2019; Knol *et al.* 2019; Knol *et al.* 1996; Knol 2007b; Hijsszeler 2007; Van Es 1970; Van Giffen 1920). However, even these five cemeteries were already partly destroyed before excavations began. Still, from these sites, we have a lot of well-preserved skeletal material from the inhumation graves as well as cremated human remains which were studied osteologically.

However, from the Frisian early medieval evidence, there is no compelling explanation regarding why a certain person was either cremated or inhumed. Notably, the evidence does not indicate that the choice of disposal method was governed by the individual's osteologically estimated sex or age and burial wealth does not suggest a simple distinction between those receiving a cremation or inhumation burial. So, we have quite a lot of reliable burial data, but there is no clear pattern. Perhaps there were complex rules regarding choosing a burial method which cross-cut identity categories, or maybe it was down to circumstances or personal or family preference.

Cremation in Frisia introduced

Femke Lippok: Can you explain the nature of the settlement and economy of the region in the Early Middle Ages?

EK: These were coastal communities whose subsistence consisted of farming, fishing and trading. There is a narrow rim of the coastal area, and behind it is a vast moor. The coastal marsh itself was very fertile and suitable for cattle breeding and agriculture. However, occasionally the land was flooded by the sea. By building artificial mounds, named *terpen* or *wierden*, dwelling places were created above sea level. These *terps* possessed, of course, of limited space. The region was an isolated and densely populated rim along the coast but with extensive maritime connections (Hines and IJssennagger-van der Pluijm 2021; Figure 7.1). Behind the moors, the Pleistocene hinterland was settled as well. This hinterland, the province of Drenthe, was, however, not included in my study. The early medieval cemeteries in Drenthe were mixed, too, with inhumation and cremation burials (Van Es 1967: 409–521; Van Es and Schoen 2008).

HW: What relationship existed between inhumations and cremations in Frisia's early medieval cemeteries? Do they ever occur in the same grave context? How do you explain their co-occurrence?

EK: My first point is that the coastal area had been densely populated in Roman times and some centuries earlier, but we have little idea what people did with their dead before the fifth century. There are no cemeteries and only very scarce inhumation and cremation burials dispersed

across the landscape. Within the settlements, archaeologists have found unburnt human bones. Annett Nieuwhof has argued that the dead were excarnated in this period (Nieuwhof 2015). This idea doesn't sit well with the modern people in Friesland, but it is a theory that needs to be taken seriously. In the fourth century, the coastal area is largely deserted (Nieuwhof 2016). From the fifth century onward, we get formal cemeteries, where people were inhumed or deposited in cremation burials. The reason for this change is unknown. However, in the Elbe-Weser triangle in Germany, mixed cemeteries were used simultaneously, and many started even earlier than the cemeteries in Frisia (Schön 2005; Peek *et al.* 2021).

Material culture suggests that there is an Anglo-Saxon influence, although it remains difficult to pin down the scale of migration as opposed to the exchange of ideas and other gifts and commodities (Knol 2009). We can see similar shifts in Drenthe, just to the south-east of Frisia, where the same kind of cemeteries appeared in the early medieval period.

An unanswered question is why one person was cremated and another inhumed. The best evidence to answer this question stems from Oosterbeintum: the only recently excavated cemetery, and the nearby cemetery of Hogebeintum, which was not excavated but only documented in 1904–1907 (Figures 7.2–7.3). Neither the available information about the investigated cremated and inhumed bones nor the presence or absence of grave goods indicates why certain people were cremated or inhumed. We can conclude that this difference is unrelated to gender, age, or wealth. Cremation tended to be used more often with small children, but there are also inhumed children on the same site: no clear-cut rule exists. In the salty, undyked, marsh area, wood was likely scarce. However, substantial amounts of wood were used both in the building of coffins and pyres.

In his contribution to this book, Gareth Perry, raised the question whether certain urns were gender specific. Unfortunately, the possibility of determining the sex of cremated bones is limited. A quick scan of the sexed bones of Hogebeintum showed that four pots in Anglo-Saxon pottery style contained female cremated remains. Two others were not sexed but contained molten glass beads and the bones of a child. The inclusion of beads suggests that these urns also contained female-gendered persons. In Oosterbeintum, the only sexed cremation associated with an Anglo-Saxon pot was the bustum grave which was sexed as female too. These graves initially suggested that there might be a relation between Anglo-Saxon urns and the female gender/sex. But when I checked the cemetery of Beetgum, containing at least thirty-two urns and some documented inhumation graves (Knol 2008), of the sixteen Anglo-Saxon-style pots, two contained a woman and three a man. After all, the beautifully decorated Anglo-Saxon



Figure 7.3: A view of the Oosterbeintum cemetery, where inhumation and cremation graves were found in close proximity. The traces of cremation graves included urned cremations and so-called ash-stains (small concentrations of charcoal, burnt clay, and small amounts of cremation remains collected at the bottom of a posthole. Depicted are the inhumation grave 241, the urned cremation grave 267 in section (bottom right) and in between them, ash-stain 265 (left) and 266 (right) (Photographs by the Groningen Institute of Archaeology, University of Groningen)

pots were not exclusively used for women. Children were often buried in a small urn, but sometimes a small urn contained an adult. So this, too, is not an exclusive trend. In regards to wealth, the richest grave of Hogebeintum, with a golden front-plate of an annual brooch, was found in a plain, undecorated urn. So far, it is the only gold find in a Frisian grave (Knol 1993: 214; Nicolay 2014: 63–64). Overall, urns were not purpose-made but chosen from what was available in the household, as attested by some encrustation of food.

In summary, the relationship between cremation and inhumation graves is not clear-cut. All ages and sexes were both cremated and inhumed, and wealth in burial goods also does not seem to be a differentiating factor.

Cremation in comparison

HW: We should be aware of the maritime connections of the region.

EK: Yes, there are a lot of opportunities for contacts along the coast. Waterways of all kinds play a major role in this area's connectivity. So, in the cemeteries cruciform brooches, annual brooches, small-long brooches and, of course, so-called 'Anglo-Saxon pottery' are found. This pottery was made locally of available clay. These are leading artefacts in the discussion of the North Sea connectivity, including discussions on the Anglo-Saxon migrations (Knol 1993: 196-205; Nieuwhof 2017; 2021; Krol *et al.* 2018).

FL: What about more southern regions? Do cremations from there compare with those from Frisia, and does southward migration from Frisia explain them?

EK: It is true that in the more southern areas, cremations are not as numerous. I can imagine that scholars look upon those cremations as something special and therefore try to label them as intrusive in some way. But then, if they follow this line of reasoning, they should attribute the same causality to both disposal methods because it was a Frisian custom to both cremate and inhumate their dead. Unfortunately, those supposed Frisian inhumations are never recognised. But I am not sure I would claim that most/every cremation burial in the southern Netherlands was an immigrant from Frisia. In the same way, the inhumations of Frisia should not be seen as migrants from elsewhere! We don't see a difference in the material culture associated with cremated and inhumed persons. Cruciform brooches, for example, often identified as typically Anglo-Saxon, are not just found in cremations but also in inhumations (Knol 2011). There is no possibility to distinguish a cremated and inhumed person in terms of objects placed with them. Isotope research might help us regarding the question of the possible difference in the origin of cremated and inhumed persons.

Cremation in decline

HW: What is your take on explaining the occurrence or disappearance of cremation burials towards the end of the Early Middle Ages as a result of Christianisation?

EK: To start off, if the process of Christianisation is to be recognised in the burial rites, one must study this on the local scale. The following interpretation is probably applicable to the Dutch northern coastal area, but it is not necessarily applicable to other regions. In my area in the eighth–ninth centuries, based on the dating of the urns, cremation still is practised in the provinces Groningen and Ost-Friesland (Germany). The cremation ritual ends in a movement from west to east based on the stylistic dating of the urns, ending earliest in Friesland in the mid-eighth century, and later in Groningen in the late eighth century and finally in Ost-Friesland in the early ninth century (Knol 1993: 169; Schmid 1972; Bärenfänger 1988). In Frisia, the Christianisation spread from west to east. After a lost battle in 734, Westergo and Oostergo were converted. In 786, Liudger was commissioned with the conversion of the Groninger and adjoining German areas. In short, there is a correlation between the historically attested process of Christianisation and the trend away from cremation, with Friesland abandoning cremation before Groningen and Ost-Friesland. This informs my impression that Christianisation in Frisia meant the end of the cremation ritual.



Figure 7.4: Oosterbeintum grave 611: an ash-stain / posthole in the southern section of the excavation, indicating the possible presence of a pyre construction (photograph by the Groningen Institute of Archeology, University of Groningen)



Figure 7.5: Section view of ash-stain 193 at Oosterbeintum (Photograph by the Groningen Institute of Archeology, University of Groningen)

A second factor to be considered relates to the early medieval inhumation graves, specifically their orientation. From the Christianisation period onwards, you get more rows of west–east orientated graves. It used to be accepted that aligned graves were Christian, but that is not correct since, in pre-Christian times, there were already many west–east graves. It is only when you get a consequent row of graves that are oriented west–east that you can consider this to be a sign of Christianity. These two things, the disappearance of cremations and the appearance of consistently west–east aligned inhumations can be related to Christianisation. There is a rapid decline in grave goods as well, but occasionally these are still recorded in the ninth century. But it should be noted that this is a general trend, not an absolute thing and it takes some time before these changes become apparent (Knol 2004; Knol and Nowak-Klimscha 2013).

FL: It is often said that the introduction of Christianity is inaccurately attributed as the reason for changing burial customs. But here you regard the introduction of Christianity as directly resulting in the disappearance of cremation burials?

EK: Christianisation is a major change at this point in time, I am not aware of another change that might explain the shift in mortuary practice. Besides, it is known that in the seventh century, Christians believed that it was not right to cremate the dead. It is known that this was not the case in the early times of Christianity, but in the later periods, cremation was not allowed in the Christian faith. So, I suppose that the fact that it wasn't allowed and that Christianisation is such a major process in this period leads us to support the argument that the decreasing number of cremation graves has something

to do with Christianisation. But this is only true for the seventh/eighth century CE.

For the eighth century, a remarkable number of burials, inhumation as well as cremation, contained weapons. The majority of graves contain a *spatha* sword, some a *langsax* sword, or a spearhead. In twenty-four sites in total, thirty-one inhumation and four cremation weapon burials were documented (Knol 1993: 181–187; 2001; 2005; 2007a; 2007b). In Hogebeintum, one urn was accompanied by a bent *langsax* and a spearhead. In Godlinze, three cremation graves contained bent weapons and other equipment like an *umbo* and stirrups. Unfortunately, the possibilities for preserving these interesting finds were limited in 1919, when they were found. The lumps of iron rust from the three graves were mixed up but kept in the store of the Groninger Museum. After modern conservation, the large number of Carolingian weapons came to light (Knol and Bardet 1999; Knol 2001).

In contrast, in the fifth/sixth and seventh centuries, only three inhumation and two cremation graves contained a weapon (Knol 1993: 179–180). Weapon graves are strongly associated with episodes of intense rivalry in a rapidly changing society (Theuvs and Alkemade 2000). In the eighth century, the Frankish kings were conquering the Frisian area, so I connect this shift of burial rites with that period of stress. I propose that some of these eighth-century cremations that contained weapons were not followers of the Frankish people; they were instead opposing the Frankish Empire. Therefore, if you oppose the Christian Frankish power, I can imagine you have a reason to choose cremation as a burial rite for its symbolic value. It would be like expressing your disgust for Christianity by cremating your dead as a political statement (Knol and Bardet 1999; Knol 2001).

Cremation in context

HW: How do the cremations of Frisia compare to those of the Dutch River Area? Do you see many similarities or differences in the use of containers, deposition or other factors?

EK: One difference is that cremation is not as common in the Dutch River and the southern Netherlands as in the Frisian area. I have not made a specific study of the cemeteries in this part of the Netherlands and cannot comment on the topic in depth. However, Frisia does offer some unique features regarding cremations: during the excavation of Oosterbeintum, traces of cremation were more often found in cinerary urns (Knol *et al.* 1996). Apart from that, there are a lot of other traces which are sometimes discerned as *brandgruben*: cremation remains in a pit without a preserved container but also other traces of posts (called ash-stains in reports) were found, indicating the existence of the construction of a pyre (Figures 7.4–7.5). These ash-stains are discolorations of the soil containing mixed cremated bones, ash and burnt soil, not enough for a complete cremation, but it has something to do with the cremation process. The problem at Oosterbeintum is that the surface level was truncated and so these traces of cremation, ash-stains, are difficult to interpret. They prompt us to reflect on how we define a 'burial'. It is difficult to say if these other traces are intended depositions of cremated bones or incidental results of the building of solid post-supported cremation pyres. Furthermore, we have many deposits containing a few children's calcinated bones. A child's cremation yields a small amount of cremated bone, so it remains possible that we might be seeing complete cremation burials of infants and younger children in these ash-stains. Often these ash-stains come in pairs of four, and there is an interpretation that they are little houses for the dead. I don't believe in that interpretation, but I do believe they are connected to posts of the construction of the pyre. They are found in Germany as well (Knol *et al.* 1996: 267–270).

Another interesting type of grave in Oosterbeintum consists of inhumation graves that also contain a few pieces of cremated bone. At first glance, these might be interpreted as the remains of the scattering of cremated bones in the inhumation grave, but they result from disturbed cremation graves that were filled back into the inhumation grave when it was dug.

Cremation structures

HW: The four- and five-post structures from early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries have been postulated as pyres, most recently for the Tranmer House cemetery (Fern 2015). We may need further excavation and detailed analysis

of these structures before drawing firm conclusions (Meyers Emery and Williams 2018).

EK: Yes, the problem is also that, at least in Oosterbeintum, these features were often recognised at the bottom of the post-hole; at the surface level they are very hard to identify.

Cremation and public understanding

FL: The occurrence of cremation burials in Frisia has been connected to regional identities. As a museum curator, how do you think this features in the public's understanding and engagement of these burials/this time period?

EK: At the moment, I am not dealing with this issue in my day-to-day job, but if I were to curate an exhibition about early medieval burial rites, I would explain that both inhumation and cremation were in use simultaneously. When I give a lecture to the general public, I always point to present-day funeral practices by way of analogy. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in the Netherlands, you could not easily explain why someone was buried or cremated. In the first half of the twentieth century, some people had left the church, including some socialists, and they chose to cremate their dead as a statement. Meanwhile, Christians, certainly Catholic people, inhumed their dead. Back then, the disposal method could reflect a very strong religious and socio-political division. In the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in my experience, that was no longer clear. Many Christians have their dead cremated, and some people with no connection to the church still bury their dead. It is a question of personal preference, I cannot explain it otherwise. Perhaps we can imagine a similar situation in the past, where there was a certain freedom of choice.

Regarding ethnicity, in relation to the modern public: there has been a strong debate about ethnicity and archaeology in Frisia, especially in the 1950s when the archaeologist Boeles proclaimed that the Anglo-Saxons destroyed the old Frisians by conquering Frisia and making an end to a very long Frisian history that went back to Roman times (and earlier to at least the fifth century BCE). People used to be very upset at the idea of this long history being interrupted (Boeles 1951; Bazelmans 2002). It was a topic of conversation back then, but nowadays, these kinds of feelings seem to have disappeared. The only controversial topic is the possibility that the Frisians excarnated their dead! The general public doesn't like the idea of laying beloved ones somewhere in the fields to be eaten by wild animals and ravens very much. Somehow it looks careless to them.

Other disposal methods

HW: What is the evidence for excarnation, actually? It is easy to make any burial ritual look negative, but what is the actual evidence of this burial rite taking place?

EK: Usually, the evidence is based on bones that were found, uncremated human bones with gnaw-marks of dogs. The second consideration is that we know that the majority of people lived in Frisia were not found in burials. So, this absence of traces of dead people needs to be explained (Nieuwhof 2015: 293–294). The problem, of course, is the archaeological visibility of excarnation, laying out a body for excarnation will leave very little evidence for archaeologists to find. This ritual is probably not in practice anymore in early medieval times; at least, we have no evidence from this time.

FL: We have some evidence that excarnation took place in the seventh century in Oegstgeest, where bones with gnaw marks were found in a settlement context (Van Spelde 2021).

EK: That's interesting, as it could have happened in Frisia as well.

Future work

HW: What methodological advances do you see influencing the study of early medieval cremations in the foreseeable future?

EK: Firstly, radiocarbon dating needs to be applied on a large scale. It is already utilised, but often only some cremations are dated, and not all of them. The more dated graves, the better the insight into the cemetery, but also on the dating of the pottery. A lot of progress can still be made by dating the ceramics found with cremations, as well as the charcoal found with these graves. Second, we require very careful excavation of cemeteries to gain more information on 'ash-stains', possibly connected to cremation rituals. These ash-stains were often overlooked or disregarded in favour of investigating cinerary urns.

HW: How do you see the advancement in isotopic study of cremation remains changing the way we look at (early medieval) cremations? What questions might this methodological advancement help us answer for Frisia specifically?

EK: There is only one study of isotopes of the inhumations of the cemetery of Oosterbeintum. Seven individuals are regarded as immigrants on the basis of the strontium isotopes indicating the individuals had grown up in an area with a Palaeozoic geology. (McManus 2010;

McManus *et al.* 2013). These graves do not have distinctive grave goods. Three are buried at the periphery of the cemetery. One of these individuals is peculiar, being a male with a female outfit. However, so far, there is no study of isotopes of cremated bones.

FL: What new discoveries or new ideas offer exciting new avenues for the study of early medieval cremations?

EK: There have been no large-scale excavations of cemeteries recently in the northern Netherlands. Recently only sites with some graves, like the cemetery of Midlum, were excavated (Hielkema 2017). I am afraid that these graves are part of a large cemetery that has since disappeared. It is very likely that this cemetery had contained undiscovered cremation graves, but it was a damaged site, and the traces of cremation graves might have already been lost.

I was very lucky that I was able to excavate Oosterbeintum. But excavations in the Terpen of Frisia are very limited because they are protected by law against extensive change (including excavation). Excavations for scientific interests are not possible either. We'll have to wait for an unexpected surprise when a new cemetery is discovered. However, in 2019 I published a cemetery at Hogebeintum that was excavated in 1904 (Knol 2019; Knol *et al.* 2019; Prummel and Knol 2021). Focusing on re-evaluating older material must be our focus as I am afraid circumstances mean we have to work with what we've got at the moment!

FL: Lastly, if you could send in ten samples for a free ¹⁴C date, what site / what graves would you spend it on?

EK: I think I would like to date some cremations of the two unpublished small cemeteries at Ferwerd-Burmania not far from the Hogebeintum and Oosterbeintum terps. Both yielded mixed-rite cemeteries. We already have a lot of information from Ooster- and Hogebeintum and it would be great if we could get additional data from a different site. The same could be said for Godlinze, but unfortunately, the associations between the urns and the cremated remains in Godlinze are not to be trusted. After the excavation, they re-filled some urns with cremated remains that were not originally found in them. In Frisia we have a lot of old finds. They enable us to construct a picture of funeral customs, widening our view on which grave goods were used, and the general dating of the cemeteries. The disadvantage is of course that the documented information is limited to present day standard. However, the transition to modern excavation in our study area is small, given the protected monument status of the terps.



Figure 7.6: Oosterbeintum grave 160: a bustum grave. In the left corner, a small 'Schalenuerne' was deposited. The Bustum was partly cut through by an inhumation grave of an achondroplastic person (Photograph by the Groningen Institute of Archeology, University of Groningen)



Figure 7.7: Oosterbeintum grave 160: a Bustum which included copious amounts of charcoal in its lower section (Photograph by the Groningen Institute of Archaeology, University of Groningen)



Figure 7.8: Oosterbeintum grave 160: the lower part of a Bustum grave (Photograph by the Groningen Institute of Archeology, University of Groningen)

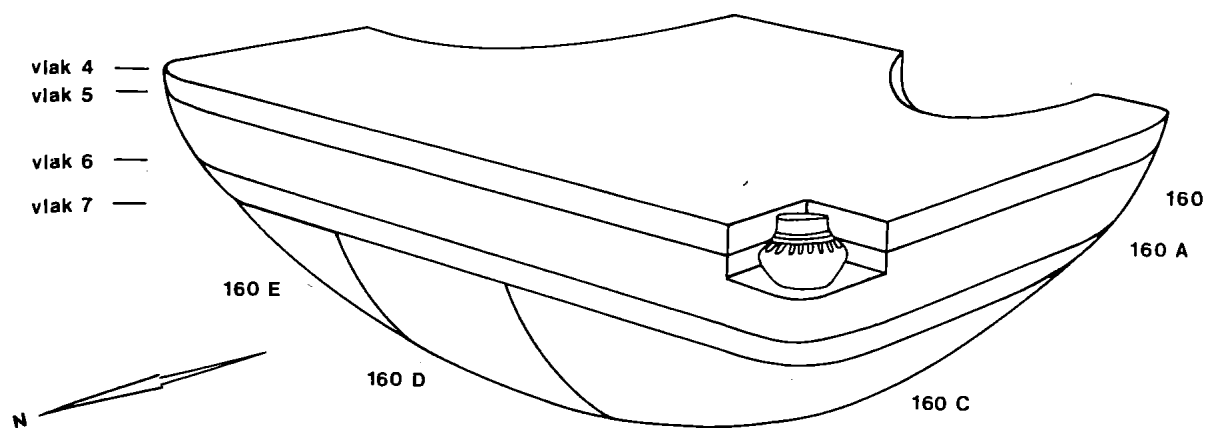


Figure 7.9: A perspective drawing of Oosterbeintum grave 160, which was not recognised as a Bustum grave at first. The Bustum was transected by an inhumation grave and a shallow ditch. The pit's layers were sieved separately (Drawing after Knol *et al.* 1996)

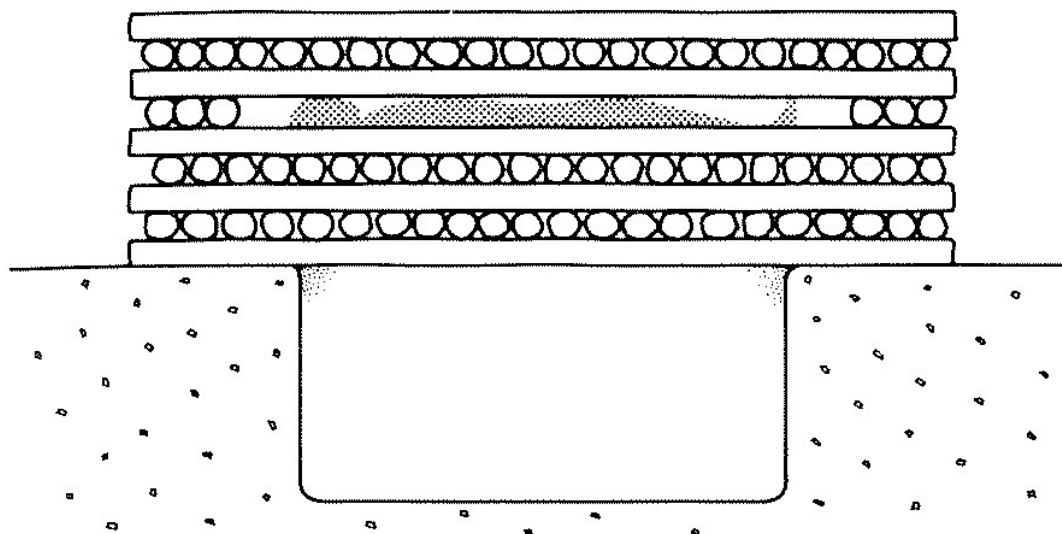


Figure 7.10: Reconstruction of a Bustum grave before cremation occurred: the pyre is constructed above the pit (after Knol *et al.* 1996)

Key data and future work: Friesland and Groningen

Where do cremations occur in Frisia?

During the early medieval period (400–750 CE) cremation and inhumation were practised simultaneously in Frisia. Before 800, the cremation-rite was abandoned in West Frisia (province Fryslan), and in Eastern Frisia (province Groningen and Ostfriesland in (Germany) around 800 CE.

In what quantities do cremations occur in Frisia?

In Oosterbeintum, we found forty-seven inhumations, twenty-one urned cremations, four cremations without urns, and a lot of other traces of cremation. However, this and other cemeteries were only partly excavated or only documented by collected finds. So, the ratio between cremation and inhumations is, at best, a rough guess. All the more as inhumation continued after cremation rites ceased.

In what forms are cremations deposited in Frisia?

Urned graves; unurned graves (either without a container or a container that decomposed without trace; at least one *bustum* grave (Figures 7.6–7.10); traces of postholes of the pyre, cremation material dispersed in inhumation graves (probably cremation graves disturbed by digging an inhumation grave). Unfortunately, the unurned cremation traces are only found in modern excavations, which probably means many were lost during the older excavations.

What types of containers are associated with cremations? (e.g. wooden containers, leather pouches?)

EK: Ceramic pots (handmade pottery, rarely wheel-turned pottery) but other containers are not recognised.

Are there funerary monuments or other structures surrounding cremations in Frisia

EK: Above-ground monuments and structures have not been observed apart from a possible ring-ditch of a burial mound at Oosterbeintum. However, this example is tentative because the ring-ditch belonged to a grave, and it might have simply marked a ditch demarcating the burial. In the sandy area of the Dutch province Drenthe and in the Ostfrisian peninsula (Germany), these burial mounds are recorded in the excavation of the cemetery Wijster Looveen, Zweeloo, Dunum, Zetel and Jever-Clevers dating from the period 650–950 CE (Van Es 1967: 409–521; Van Es and Schoen 2008; Schmid 1972; Rötting 1977; Marschallack 1978).

Where osteological data is available, is there any apparent selection of deceased according to their sex or age?

EK: No, at least the well-researched cemetery of Oosterbeintum did not give any osteological evidence indicating a selection according to sex, age or wealth (wealth according to documented grave-/pyre-goods).

When objects occur with cremations, what type of objects are they? (do they tend to be burnt or unburnt?)

EK: The range of artefacts recovered include beads, brooches, combs, knives, amulets, knuckle bones that were used as gaming pieces or oracle stones, and occasionally weapons. Most artefacts reveal signs of being burnt, although some items in Hogebeintum are unburnt. It is not recorded if they were treated differently in terms of their placement.

Which site in your research area featuring cremation burials deserves more attention, and why?

EK: Oosterbeintum is the only larger modern excavation (1988–1989) researched by a group of specialists, including the burnt and unburnt human and animal bones, wood and charcoal, and of course archaeological traces and objects. The cemetery included, apart from urns and inhumation graves, a *bustum* grave, an inhumed achondroplastic person (i.e. an individual with achondroplastic dwarfism), six inhumed dogs and a horse burial, as well as a grave with the cremated remains of a lamb or kid and a teal. The cremated remains were investigated, and radiocarbon dates are available (Knol *et al.* 1996; Lanting and Van der Plicht 2012; McManus *et al.* 2013). The nearby cemetery of Hogebeintum documented in 1904–1907 was recently published as well. Here too the cremated remains were investigated and radio carbon dates are available (Knol *et al.* 2019). No other Dutch Frisian cemetery yielded more information than Oosterbeintum.

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Cremation on the Frankish Northern Periphery

Rica Annaert

The excavation of the Merovingian burial field at Broechem (province of Antwerp) led to new research on early medieval funerary rituals in Flanders. In particular, the presence of seventy-five cremation graves among the 513 inhumations brought the already known cremation rite in the Scheldt Valley back into focus. Although inhumation became the usual burial rite since the late Roman period, in some areas a minority of cremation graves can be found in the early medieval inhumation cemeteries. The nature of these cremations suggests a link with incoming families from northern areas who remained loyal to their own traditions. Since both rituals occur mixed on common burial grounds, it can be assumed that an acculturation of traditions took place which led to a common identity. In this new research into the meaning and origins of early medieval cremation, interdisciplinary cooperation involving radiocarbon dating, physical anthropological research, isotope research, petrography and experimental archaeology, has proven to be very important.

Merovingian funerary rituals, continuity, mobility, transition, acculturation, methodologies

Introduction

Femke Lippok: How did you get into the study of early medieval cremation graves?

Rica Annaert: As an archaeologist working for the Flemish heritage agency in 1999, I was responsible for the province of Antwerp. After the accidental discovery of two complete Merovingian pots at Broechem, an indicator of the presence of a Merovingian cemetery, our former director decided to proceed with an excavation. I got the opportunity to excavate the largest early medieval burial ground in Flanders to date, a dream of many an archaeologist come true! The site yielded exciting finds and cremation graves. My earlier work had already brought me into contact with cremation burials from Bronze Age barrows, Early Iron Age urnfields and a cemetery dating to the transition between the Iron Age and Roman Period (Annaert 2008; Annaert and Van Impe 1985; Annaert *et al.* 2012). The most fascinating cremations I've personally encountered, however, remain the early medieval ones at Broechem (Annaert *et al.* 2011; Annaert 2018; Annaert *et al.* 2020). At the time of excavating them, early medieval cremation burials were not very well known and perceived as something special in the region. We'd personally not encountered them before, although they were known from some early excavations on cemeteries in the Scheldt valley, for example at Ghent-Port Arthur (Maertens de Noordhout 1928), Lede (Maertens de Noordhout 1928: 83), Dendermonde-Zwijvekeouter



Figure 8.1: Schalenurn from one of the oldest cremation graves in the Broechem cemetery (Photograph by the Flemish Heritage Agency)

(Van Doorselaer 1958; Van Doorselaer and Opsteyn 1999) and Velzeke (Van Durme 1969–1971; Van Doorselaer and Rogge 1985: 168–170). The novelty made them especially fascinating to me, adding to our understanding of what early medieval burials comprised of.

Cremation outlined

FL: As you mentioned before, in Broechem and other sites, evidence of cremation often occurs in association with inhumation practices. It can even be said that cremation rarely occurs in isolation. What relationship existed between inhumation burials and cremation burials in your research area? Do they occur on the same site, or even in the same grave context?

RA: Following the trend of the late Roman period, inhumation was far more prevalent than cremation in the Early Middle Ages. Vast inhumation burial grounds emerged. In some of these cemeteries, a minority of cremation graves can also be found in certain regions (for example in the Scheldt Valley). Thanks to radiocarbon dating we know that, in the fifth century, cremation practices get re-introduced to the burial repertoire. This re-introduction can be tied to the cross-Rhine colonisation by possible former *laeti* and *foederati* who were in service in the Roman army that was disbanded at that time and settled down in the region with their families amongst Gallo-Roman rural communities. We can speak of an amalgamation of different traditions (Annaert 2022b; Van Thienen 2016). The cremation practice was probably still present in the collective memory of the native people who had practised cremation during the Iron Age and Roman period (for example, at Antwerp: Bellens *et al.* 2007; Edegem:

Vandeveld *et al.* 2007; Grobbendonk western cemetery: Mertens 1961; Janssens 1966; and for a general survey: Van Thienen 2016). The same happened to house-building traditions, where different variations of Gallo-Roman types and trans-Rhenan building types popped up and were amalgamated in hybrid settlements as for instance at Donk (De Paepe and Van Impe 1991), Turnhout (De Smaele *et al.* 2012), Lummen-Meldert (Smeets and Steenhoudt 2012) and Grobbendonk (Reyns and Cléda 2018). In these third- to fourth-century settlements, the typical Gallo-Roman rural house plans with sunken byres were found alongside typical ‘Germanic’ house plans of the Wijster type and sometimes sunken featured buildings (SFBs), as in Donk (Van Impe 1983), Rekem (De Boe 1983 and 1986), Kuringen (Hazen 2016), Grobbendonk (Annaert 2022a). This is what I envision happened in regards to cremation rites as well. This is supported by the case study of Broechem where the oldest cremation burials appear grouped around a central urn grave which was deposited in a *Schalenurn* (Annaert 2018: 42; Figure 8.1). These could be the graves of the first colonising family who brought the remains of their ancestor with them in line with what Terje Østigård postulates elsewhere regarding the portability of cinerary urns transported with migrant groups (Østigård 1999). The cremation rite seems to be accepted rapidly across the entire burial community at Broechem alongside inhumation practices. At the same time, we’ve encountered the bi-rituality of cremation and inhumation in the same grave, which calls for a different interpretation (Figure 8.2). There are parallels from Viking Age Scandinavia, which offer an explanation for these types of graves. In Swedish South-Western Scania it is suggested that the cremated remains of ancestors were deposited in newly created inhumation graves. It has been postulated that this practice interbred the extra deposition of cremation remains as a highly performative way to express identity and kinship in the transformative process of a funeral (Satalecki 2016: 50–52). After all, introducing an ancestor during the burial rituals emphasises family and kin ties (see also Masanz, this volume). We would need more detailed radiocarbon dates from cremation burials to substantiate if older cremated remains were deposited in younger inhumations at Broechem and the other graveyards.

Explaining cremation

FL: What is the generally accepted explanation for the occurrence of cremation practices in your research area?

RA: In Belgium, and specifically Flanders, we can speak of two tendencies for the interpretation of early medieval cremation burials. On the one hand, there is the long-standing view of Roosens (1968: 19) who believed that early medieval cremation had trans-Rhenan roots. On the other, there are Van Doorselaer and Rogge (Van Doorselaer and



Figure 8.2: Bi-ritual grave of Boechout. Wooden chamber grave with two rectangular wooden containers, one with an inhumation deposition of a woman(?) and a small one with a cremation deposition of two individuals, a child and an adult (Photograph by the Studiebureau Archaeologie BVBA)

Rogge 1985; Rogge 1985), who believed in the continuity of the cremation ritual from the Roman period to early medieval times in the Scheldt valley. I don't follow their interpretation as it is very clear that the Roman cremations in this region are very different to the early medieval ones (see also Veselka, this volume). For example, the grave pits of the Roman cremation graves are bigger, and the grave gifts are seldom burned on the pyre. The Roman pyres also seem to have been deliberately extinguished, which caused greater fragmentation of the burnt bones (Vandenbruaene 2009: 32; see also Mason, this volume). The remains were also selected as a *pars pro toto* (i.e. bone weights are very low) which does not happen in early medieval cremation burials in the same region.

FL: A follow-up question to this: As you explained, early medieval cremation burials found in Belgium have been interpreted in conflicting ways – some have interpreted them as a continued tradition by the Gallo-Roman peoples, others claim they are the result of Germanic settlers. It's interesting that these explanations seem to co-exist, at least in some form. I've always thought this duality came from Belgium's socio-political duality in Flanders and Wallonia.

Fehr (2010: 75) notes Belgium's importance in researching the Germanic-Romanic language barrier that runs through the country. This research was part of the Third Reich's agenda for claiming land as inherently Germanic and has since been falsified (Fehr 2010: 226). In this, now outdated model, the indigenous interpretation could be seen as favoured by those who advocated for Belgium's sovereignty. Could these dual interpretations be a relic of this conflict? What is your take on the role of Belgium's history and heritage in this matter?

RA: I don't think the historical background is the reason for these conflicting theories. There were really personal disagreements between the archaeologists at that time. I think you can explain this more from that angle. Yes, we know that Roosens had contact with German archaeologists during the Second World War. Yet, I don't think this had an influence on his theory because he also recognised other characteristics in the Scheldt valley, such as the variety in the orientation of the graves, the presence of so-called chamber graves and the presence of horse burials (Roosens 1968). He was one of the first specialists in early medieval archaeology that made a regional overview of

a period which was not known very well at that time in Flanders. That Van Doorselaer saw a Roman continuity in the early medieval cremation graves, however, should perhaps be seen in the light of his PhD on the Gallo-Roman burial rituals (Van Doorselaer 1963). So I don't think the historical background is the reason for this duality in interpretation. Their field's divergent perspectives might have influenced them in proposing these explanations.

FL: To reiterate, do you think then that immigration explains the occurrence of cremations in your research area?

RA: Yes, my interpretation is that new settlers reintroduced the cremation ritual to the Scheldt valley. Cremation is not only present at Broechem but in the whole of the Scheldt valley of which Broechem is a part, even in the French Scheldt river basin (Brunet *et al.* this volume). Immigrants certainly arrived from across the Scheldt from the north, which is supported by the find of the *Schalenurn* at Broechem amongst its earliest graves (see Figure 8.1). This urn is certainly not of local provenance, the clay must have come from more northern regions based on typology and the colour of the clay, probably the Elbe-Weser region around Bremen and Hamburg. We also found ceramics made of non-local clay in inhumation graves, which indicates that there must have been some colonisation in the region (Braekmans 2018).

FL: I also read about the isotope research on the cremation remains, is that something that adds to this at well?

RA: Yes, in the first strontium isotope analysis we conducted within the CRUMBEL project there were some outliers that must have had a different origin, mainly in the cluster cremation graves with the *Schalenurn* in the oldest part of the Broechem cemetery. However, this is still a work in progress as my colleague Amanda is still working on constructing the strontium map for Belgium. At this point I cannot add anything more. We plan to do isotope analysis on the early medieval cremations of Brecht, Boechout, Broechem and Echt (Veselka *et al.* 2021; Veselka, this volume).

FL: If you argue that cremation in the Scheldt valley was re-introduced by trans-Rhenan settlers, how does this differ from the old interpretation that cremations are Germanic?

RA: Yes, I certainly don't argue that all the cremated people were immigrants, and I also don't believe in mass migration and that all cross-Rhine immigrants practised the cremation ritual. What I do believe is that the cremation ritual was reintroduced by some newcomers from regions where cremation was the tradition. And that

this practice was soon accepted by the new community. It is not surprising to me that people were looking for new rituals in a transition period like that between Roman and early medieval times because there was an evolving situation, new and mixed communities. In this context, the new ritual could also express a new and common identity.

Cremation in context

FL: What is your take on explaining the occurrence or disappearance of cremation burials towards the end of the Early Middle Ages, and what do you think about the idea that this came about as a result of Christianisation?

RA: So, we see that cremation seems to disappear in the Scheldt region at the end of the seventh and beginning of the eighth century, and none of the burial sites around chapels or churches contain evidence of cremation practices. There are, of course, some exceptions as of the Frankfurter Dom (Wamers 2015; see Masanz, this volume) and some other cremations in churchyards (see Brunet *et al.* this volume). However, in our region, we don't have cremations in Christian burial sites although I have to admit that the knowledge of Carolingian burial grounds is very poor. We also know from the written sources that the Council of Paderborn strictly prohibited cremation in 785/786 CE (Young 1977), so I think Christianity was indeed the main reason for abandoning cremation. However, the process of Christianisation in our peripheral (in political terms) regions took a very long time. So, I think that's why the ritual of cremation continued at least until the eighth century, as we don't have any Christian churches in our region before that period. Most parishes did not even exist before the twelfth century.

RA: I think there is a direct connection between the decreasing cremation practices and developing Christianity, but it's good to keep in mind that the transition between and co-existence of cremation and inhumation happened during many periods of human existence. We must see it in this way as well.

FL: This answer perfectly leads to our next question, which is about the CRUMBEL project you are a part of. CRUMBEL considers cremation in long-term perspective from the Mesolithic to the Early Middle Ages. How does placing the early medieval cremation practices within this broader time-frame affect your view of them?

RA: It amazes me that cremation was already in use from Mesolithic times. It makes you wonder what the meaning of the practice was then. In our radiocarbon paper (Capuzzo *et al.* 2020), we talk about the waves of alternating popularity of the inhumation and cremation practices throughout (pre)history. I don't know why this

is happening, but it is an amazing phenomenon and these trends are still ongoing.

FL: Yes, this pattern helps to view cremation not as an ending process but rather a fluctuation. You also touched upon the role of historical sources in the interpretation of these cremation burials when you mentioned the Paderborn text, which forbade people from assisting in cremation rites. What do you think are the influences of these historical sources on us archaeologists, forming our interpretations, and what effect did they have on the people in the past?

RA: I think we must be careful with those historical sources or written sources as those written sources are mostly very subjective because they are written to glorify the deeds of the saint missionaries and Christianity, and we don't have many sources of the local people themselves. I think the archaeological sources are much more important. In any case, those written sources banning the cremation practice only confirm that the cremation existed at that time, but not more than that.

FL: Agreed, and there was a need to suppress cremation, especially for the regions that may be less accessible to these authorities and harder to control, like the Scheldt valley? Speaking of the region in question, would you say that the cremation burial repertoires of your Scheldt research area are regionally distinct? How do they compare to surrounding regions?

RA: This question is difficult to answer because we don't have many cremated remains that are preserved, and we don't have many good excavation reports from that region. Most of the cemeteries were excavated in earlier times, but what I see is that there isn't much difference between graves. Most graves are simple small pits with the remains of the pyres, the *Brangrubengräber* or the *Knochenlager* where the cremains are packed in organic pouches or equivalent. At this moment, we only have two urn graves, the *Schalenuarn* at Broechem, and then there is at least one at Borsbeek where an early medieval cremation was deposited in a Late Bronze age urn. At Borsbeek the early medieval cemetery was laid down on an urn field and they used one of the pots from the urn field as an urn for the early medieval cremation. We discovered it by dating the bones, we thought they were Late Bronze Age bones, but we have an AMS radiocarbon date for the early medieval period (KIA-37917: 1460±35; 540 CE (95,4%) 650 and KIA-40552: 1465±30; 550 CE (95,4%) 650). In addition, two cremations thought to be from the Iron Age urnfield were significantly younger and indicate an early medieval date. So, in this unsuspected way, we know that also in the early medieval cemetery of Borsbeek the cremation rite was practised (De Mulder *et al.* 2012).

FL: That's amazing, and it also goes to show how archaeologically invisible the cremation practice is; imagine if this misdating happened more often – how are we to know without radiocarbon dating every single one of them?

RA: Yes, maybe there are more urns like these amongst the ones in Borsbeek. And at the early medieval cemetery of Grobbendonk (Janssens 1964; Janssens and Roosens 1963) there were some cremation pits that were dated to the Iron Age by the excavators but all other graves, including one other cremation burial with conclusively early medieval grave goods, are therefore unquestionably early medieval in date. In this context there was no reason to date them to the Iron Age and they may well belong to the early medieval cemetery.

FL: This seems to have happened regularly; people thought early medieval cremations so rare that any undatable cremation grave had to be Iron age or earlier. And that's why it is so crucial to get the word out about early medieval cremation, to prevent such assumptions from guiding the narrative.

Howard Williams: Just to be explicit here, Rica, do you agree that there has been a long-term accidental passive resistance by archaeologists to accepting an early medieval date of cremations?

RA: I think it's unfair because Roosens' publications testify, it was already known in the 1960s that early medieval cremations exist. But it is true that before Roosens' research cremation pits without grave goods on early medieval burial sites were easily attributed to an older cemetery from the Iron Age or Roman period. That's why radiocarbon dating on cremated bone is an important scientific development! Most people find it fascinating to see that early medieval cremations occur on Iron Age sites. For example, Boechout, a site with mainly Iron Age funerary features, yielded eight early medieval graves including seven inhumations, of which one double grave containing an inhumation and a cremation dated by AMS (RICH-23883: 1536±27BP; 68.2% probability 430 CE (37.7%) 490 CE–530 CE (30.5%) 570 CE; 95.4% probability 420 CE (95.4%) 590 CE) (see Figure 8.2), as well as one supplementary cremation dated by AMS to the Early Middle Ages (RICH-24119) in a ditch of an Iron Age monument resulted in 1355±28BP; 68.2% probability 645AD (68.2%) 675AD; 95.4% probability 630 CE (91.5%) 710 CE–740CE (3.9%) 770 CE), situated nearby some Late Iron Age or Middle Iron Age enclosures containing Iron Age cremation burials (Bakx *et al.* 2018).

FL: What's the most distinctive or unusual explanation for the occurrence of early medieval cremation practices that you've come across?

RA: There aren't any amusing or odd explanations as such. I do remember when visitors came to the Broechem excavation and saw that the cremation graves didn't have the beautiful finds of the inhumation graves. This convinced them that the cremation graves were those of slaves. Those same visitors couldn't believe that the cremated bones were human remains. Nowadays, people don't recognise the little cremation bones as cremations because in modern cremations the bones are crushed to a powder, and they have this idea in mind that it must always have been like that.

Cremation technologies

FL: With regards to finding selected amounts of bones in cremation depositions, do you think archaeologists underestimate the potential of cremations in the sense that they are divisible and parts of the cremated person could very well have circulated in society or have other functions that we can no longer trace?

RA: Perhaps, during a workshop with Terje Østigård (VUB, 15/12/2019), I learned that cremation was the ideal way of burial for many reasons because you can divide the cremated remains. You can spread them over different landscapes and different peoples or family groups. I find that inspirational. In archaeological contexts, you can encounter bones or cremated bones in a posthole, a ditch or an urn. In that sense, cremation is so versatile and must also have been very impressive compared to an inhumation, building a pyre, lighting the fire, and then you have the heat of the fire and the smell and the smell of the burning body and the animation of the corpse as it burned (Williams 2007). This must have been very impressive for the people in that time.

FL: Speaking of the potential of dividing cremations, especially for the Middle Ages, thinking of saints' relics, cremations would have been so much easier to handle than an inhumation. But somehow, this is not thought of very often.

RA: This reminds me of one of the owners of a parcel of land near the Broechem cemetery. When her father died, they divided the cremation remains between the brothers and sisters. She had her father's wooden urn, which he had made himself, in her house. Now she knows what it is to see cremation finds at the excavations, she opens the urn every morning and caresses the remains of her father. When I visited her once, she invited me to touch the remains as well. This was a wonderful and intimate experience. It shows that archaeology can inspire us to be less rigid in our own ways of dealing with death.

FL: Speaking of this topic, there is surely a relationship between cremation practices which involve revisiting pyres to collect ashes/cremains, and the re-opening of inhumation graves. Weren't the inhumations at Broechem sometimes re-opened as well? Could you say something about that, and is there any way of telling if cremation graves were also re-opened at Broechem?

RA: No, I don't think that cremation burials were reopened because we didn't see any traces of reopening. Cremations were found in some inhumation graves' fill as well as in some of the reopening pits directed to inhumations. But those traces are very difficult to interpret, we don't know at this point what meaning these cremains in the fills had. It could be caused by a cremation that was deposited separately on top of the grave and when the wooden lid of the coffin collapsed, the cremation could have fallen into the inhumation. In order to get to the bottom of this, we will need more radiocarbon dates. Cremains that dated older than the inhumation should indicate a specific ancestor ritual, but cremains younger than the inhumation will prove a secondary intrusion or disturbance.

New insights

FL: So, if you could send in ten samples for a free ^{14}C date, what site / what graves would you spend it on?

RA: That's so difficult to answer because we have not so many cremations that were preserved in Belgium, most of which are already dated in the CRUMBEL project. But I would select the cremation remains from Broechem that were found in the fill or at the bottom of inhumation graves, hoping that the results will give us indications for the dating of these cremation burials. If they were older, they could point towards ancestral beliefs at Broechem. Cremains of dead family members may have been stored elsewhere until the moment a closely or related person (father/mother, daughter/son, partner...) died so they could be buried together.

FL: What methodological advances do you see being of influence on the study of early medieval cremation practices in the foreseeable future?

RA: I think the new methodologies will help us tell much more about the ritual during the cremation process and of course I can mention the CRUMBEL project here (www.CRUMBEL.org; see also Veselka, this volume). Until recently, we only had the bones to study, in the best case, there were the osteological analyses, but now we have the opportunity to know much more about cremation practices. Firstly, there are the strontium isotopic analyses, but the CRUMBEL project also conducts infra-red and x ray-diffraction as well as stable isotope, carbon and oxygen



Figure 8.3: (a) Burnt fragmented pottery from a Broechem cremation grave; (b) molten glass beads from a Broechem cremation grave; (c) two burnt brooches from a Broechem cremation grave (Photographs by the Flemish Heritage Agency)



Figure 8.4: Burnt but preserved fragments of an amulet in antler from a Broechem cremation grave (Photographs by the Flemish Heritage Agency)



Figure 8.5: the CRUMBEL pyre experiment (Photography by the CRUMBEL project)

analyses. These analyses give information on the burning process. The temperature of the fire, the technique of the pyre: was it built in an open or closed atmosphere (Veselka, this volume). They tell us something about the wood that was used. With these analyses, we can trace changes in the burial rites through time and space. And we can say something about the skills of the cremators. Then you have the osteological assessment that reveals not only sex, age and pathologies but also under what conditions a body was burned: the height of the fire's temperatures and if the body was burned evenly. These observations can also tell us about the technical knowledge of the cremator. We must think of a person who knew what they were doing, as we see in the case of open-air Hindu cremations. Hindu cremations must be seen in the light of cosmogony. The funeral pyre is the most important agent in the transformation of the dead human body. A good-quality fire is therefore a crucial aspect of the cremation practice. In India, experienced cremators are therefore recruited (Østigård 2005). Because most archaeological cremains show a high efficiency to the burning process, Østigård believes that also in the past 'masters of fire' were active. He even sees the blacksmith in this role (Goldhahn and Østigård 2008).

FL: Then there is the question of the objects found in the cremations. Can 'pyre-goods' and 'grave-goods' be interpreted in comparable fashions? How were pyre-goods treated after cremation? Were they sampled partially, or were the cremated remains complete and can we see a difference in their depositions.

RA: The early medieval inhumation and cremation graves contained the same spectrum of grave goods. All dead bodies appear to have been dressed and provided with jewellery, cloth accessories, tools and food (partly in ceramic or glass pottery). The only difference is the fact that we don't find intact items in the cremation graves. All the grave-goods were placed on the pyre and burned with the dead body. Afterwards as well cremated bones as remains of the burnt objects were gathered and deposited in the grave pit. It didn't seem important that the pyre-goods were complete. Only incomplete and destroyed or melted objects are found in the cremation graves during our excavations (Figure 8.3).

Despite the fact that the pyre-finds have thus been destroyed, the pyre-goods still provide us with unique information. While organic remains have not been preserved in the inhumation graves (due to the acidity of the sandy soils), burnt organic remains are found in the cremation grave, for example, food remains, combs of antler and amulets made of antler or bone (Figure 8.4). The animal bones tell us that the dead were often accompanied by a pig's hind leg.

HW: How has the CRUMBEL project added further perspectives through experimental archaeology?

RA: Further insights are generated by our experimental work at CRUMBEL, specifically the reconstructive building of pyres ourselves. (Figure 8.5). We used logs of beech for the fire and pig's feet to be burnt in various positions and situations: some of them covered by leather to imitate shoes. From this experience, it was clear that lighting a pyre is not easy, we needed modern help to light it. Experiencing the heat of such a pyre was amazing. And after burning, it was also amazing that the white-coloured bones were very easily found in the cremains. Almost no charcoal was left. It was another striking observation that when the surface of the place of burning was cut, no heat traces or burnt earth was present in the stratigraphy. That could be an explanation as to why we almost never find locations of pyres in archaeology.

Lastly, there are the radiocarbon dates, and we have a number of radiocarbon determinations from Broechem with anomalous dating results (Annaert *et al.* 2020). We detected a difference between the human bones, which date systematically one hundred years older than the animal bones. And curiously, the dating results of the latter correspond perfectly with the typological dates of the burnt objects. Until now, only one of the Boechout cremations shows the same odd anomaly between human bone, animal bone and charcoal remains. In contrast, the cremations of Brecht were very homogeneous. We need more excavations and more radiocarbon dates of early medieval cemeteries to further explore this issue.

FL: All of these analyses will help us distinguish ways of doing a cremation, the knowledge of how to conduct a cremation was specific in time and place. And it also indicates that the cremation rite was not easily 'taken up', the technical knowledge needed to be present in society in order to have a successful cremation, as you mentioned before. Thinking back on that movement we see of alternating preferences for inhumations and cremations throughout prehistory and up to now, was that knowledge transferred throughout the generations or was it reinvented each time it was taken up again?

RA: I think collective memory played an important role in the past, while nowadays, we are dealing with a lot of other thoughts and issues. The knowledge of ancient cremation and the eastern cremation rites may have influenced the present-day preference for cremation. The Christian dogmatic view on resurrection of the intact body is vanishing in favour of more spiritual and liberal thoughts on death and afterlife. Moreover, in our densely populated society, the cremation rite provides a solution

for the issues of shortage of space in cemeteries and the clearing of older graves.

Regarding the knowledge of the burning process, I think there is no link between the operation modus of modern crematoria and the use of wooden pyres in the past.

FL: Lastly, what new discoveries or new ideas offer exciting new avenues for the study of early medieval cremations?

RA: What I found very interesting was the idea of the existence of a cremator which came about through a workshop with Terje Østigård. He has argued that in some Scandinavian cases, the cremators were the smiths of the area (Goldhahn and Østigård 2008). The bodies may have been burned in the oven of the smith. The bodies were giving the smith the opportunity to reach temperatures that allowed him to smelt ores and produce holy metal objects. Thus, the cremated person would have become part of the object. With isotopic analysis, we can see if bodies were burned in an open or closed atmosphere. I am very excited to know the results of that study.

Heritage interpretations for the early medieval cremated dead

HW: Is there anything further you would like to add about maybe the heritage interpretation of these cremation graves? Are any on display in museums, being used in broader historical and archaeological narratives? What about artistic reconstructions?

RA: I think one of the most important tasks of our job as archaeologists is public outreach. At least in Belgium, little attention is given to the display of cremations in museums. I once saw a display of Iron Age cremation remains in a post-medieval bowl. Cremains are often still widely considered useless for scientific research, although we as archaeologists know that burnt bones can help to date the archaeological context since it is known that radiocarbon dating is possible on cremains. And this scientific progress never stops. In the meantime, we know that also isotope analyses can give us very useful information. Especially for regions where the organic material (so also bones from inhumation graves) is not preserved due to the soil conditions (as in sandy Flanders), the calcined cremated bones are a wonderful treasure of information. And this must be shared with the public. It is my opinion that we have to pay more attention to how this information can reach the non-scientific audience. Museums play an important role in this matter by not exposing only the bling-bling and extraordinary objects but also the products of daily life including products of ritual practices and what information these objects can tell us (Figure 8.6)



Figure 8.6: Cremated bones placed in anatomical position for museum display (Photograph by the Flemish Heritage Agency)

Key data and future work: Flanders

Where do cremations occur in your research area?

From a diachronic view, the cremation ritual is practised in Flanders in general from the Middle Bronze Age to the late Roman period. In the latter period, there is a switch to inhumation. In the Early Middle Ages, inhumation remains the most current burial practice but from the fifth century on in some regions, especially the Scheldt Valley (seven cemeteries in the province of Antwerp and seven in the province of East-Flanders), cremation burials are also deposited in inhumation cemeteries. In the other regions in Belgium early medieval cremation is rather exceptional.

Scheldt valley:

- Borsbeek (A) (forty-three graves but the exact number cremations is unknown – At least three by ^{14}C) 7% – 575–700 CE (De Boe 1970)
- Meer (A) (unknown number of graves) (Van Impe and Roche 1977)
- Brecht (A) (seventy graves but the exact number of cremations is unknown – only cremations were noticed, but the presence of unburnt grave goods indicate that inhumations were present of which no skeletal traces remained) – 550–700 CE (Stroobant 1911; Stroobant 1912; de Loë and Rahir 1914; Van Impe 1976)
- Grobbendonk-Floris Primsstraat (A) (Seventy-three graves of which six cremations) 8% – 550–650 CE (Janssens and Roosens 1963; Janssens 1964)
- Broechem Nierlenders (A) (513 graves of which seventy-five cremations) 14% – 400–650 CE (Annaert 2018)
- Boechout-Mussenhoevelaan (A) (nine graves of which two cremations) 22% – 650–725 CE (Bakx *et al.* 2018)
- Laakdal-Vorst (A) (twelve graves of which possibly two cremations) 16% – possibly eighth century CE (Janssens and Degreef 1968)
- Lede (E.-Fl.) (100+ graves but the exact numbers cremation is unknown) – 550–700 CE (Van der Gucht 1991)
- Semmerzake (E.-Fl.) (the exact number of graves is unknown) – 500–650 CE (Van der Gucht 1982)
- Sint-Gillis-Dendermonde (E.-Fl.) (150 graves but the exact number cremations is unknown) – 450–650 CE (Van

Doorselaer 1958; Van Doorselaer 1965; Rogge 2004; Van der Gucht 1981)

- Ghent-Port Arthur (E.-Fl.) (at least ten graves but the exact number of cremations is unknown) – 550–650 CE (Van Bostraeten 1972)
- Velzeke-Bussegem (E-Fl.) (thirty-seven graves of which four cremations) = 10% – 550–700 CE (Van Durme 1969–1971)
- Ghent-Hoge Weg (E.-Fl.) (human cremation remains which possibly point to the presence of a cemetery but this is uncertain!) – ? (Laloo and Blanchaert 2010)
- Temse-Klein Broek (E.-Fl.) (Fifty-one inhumation graves, two of them containing some loose cremation remains) – 575–700 CE (Mestdagh 2022)

Other regions:

- Orsmaal-Gussenhoven (Fl. Br.) (120 graves of which at least 1 cremation is noticed) 0,8% – 500–650 CE (Provoost 1981; Raymaekers 1903; Boschmans and Verbeeck 1991)
- Gingelom-Montenaken (Limb.) (mostly cremations, but these were possible Roman cremations) – date uncertain (Van Vinckenroye 1977; Lux 1978)
- Maasmechelen-Mottekamp (Limb) (sixteen graves of which two cremation graves) 12,5% – 400–600 CE (Steenhoudt and Smeets 2012; Steenhoudt and Smeets 2018)
- De Panne (W.-Fl.) (the exact number of graves is unknown) – 600–800 CE (Deckers 2010; Meylemans 1998)

In what quantities do cremations occur in your research area?

This is difficult to say because most cemeteries are excavated in earlier times when one didn't recognise cremation graves or didn't pay much attention to cremation because they're allegedly 'useless' for research. But cremations always are in the minority opposite inhumations. Where the numbers of inhumation and cremation are known they fluctuate between 7% and 22% in the Scheldt-valley and between 0,8% and 12% in the other regions.

In what forms are cremations deposited in your research area?

For most cemeteries, this kind of information is unknown. It seems that, in general the cremated remains were deposited in a rather small pit together with the remains of the pyre. Only at Broechem a typological distinction is made: one urn grave (*Schalenurn*), thirty-three bone-packed graves where the bones seemed originally packed in an organic pouch, whether or not accompanied by pyre remains, twenty-seven so-called *brandgrubengräber* where bones were mingled with the remains of the pyre (not only charcoal but also the remains of burnt grave

goods: animal bone, ceramics, beads, ...), in four cases the cremation remains were found in combination with traces of a so-called cremation houses, a small four-post wooden building erected above the pit with cremains. The other Broechem cremations could not be typologically placed. We know that in Borsbeek also one cremation was kept in an urn, more specifically a reused Late Bronze Age urn. Most of these cremations consist of the remains of one person, in three cases remains of two persons were found (a man and a woman, a subadult and an adult, an adult and a child). At Grobbendonk and Boeichout cremation remains were found in a small wooden casket. At Grobbendonk this was a double grave with the remains of a man and a woman. At Boeichout, we can speak of a bi-ritual grave: the casket with the cremains of a child was deposited in the corner of a chamber grave with the inhumation of an adult person. Also, at Broechem and at Temse loose human cremated remains were found in the fill of the inhumation grave. Sometimes these could be interpreted as younger cremation depositions that fell down in the inhumation grave after the collapse of their wooden container.

What types of containers are associated with cremations? (e.g. urns, wooden containers, leather pouches?)

Containers were rather exceptional:

- Two urns (Broechem and Borsbeek)
- Wooden caskets (Grobbendonk and Boeichout)
- Organic pouches are more regular but recognised as such only at Broechem.

Are there funerary monuments or other structures surrounding cremations in your research area?

I can only mention the four cremation houses at Broechem.

Is there any noteworthy spatial patterning of cremation burials on the sites they occur on?

- At Velzeke, the cremations seem to be clustered in the southern part of the cemetery, some of them were cut by inhumation graves;
- at Dendermonde, the cremation graves seem to have a more scattered pattern;
- at Broechem, the oldest cremations are clustered in the northern part of the cemetery. This cluster contained the only urn grave and also the largest pits. The other cremations were scattered over the whole cemetery.

What trends can be observed regarding the occurrence of cremation burials throughout time in your research area?

In the Late Roman period, the cremation ritual seems to have disappeared in favour of inhumation. From c. 400 CE a slight

positive trend in new cremation burials is visible. This positive trend stabilised in the following sixth and seventh centuries, but the cremation ritual never replaced the inhumation ritual. Cremation burials were always the minority on inhumation burial grounds. Moreover, the cremation ritual clearly was mainly practised in the Scheldt-valley. *Brandgrubengräber* and bone-packed graves are known, urn graves are rather exceptional. After the mid-seventh century, cremation declined dramatically and after the beginning of the eighth century, cremations are totally absent (Capuzzo *et al.* 2020).

Where osteological data is available, is there any apparent selection of deceased according to their sex or age?

Not at all. For the Early Middle Ages: at Broechem males as well as females and all age categories from children to 40+ year olds were present in the cremation graves.

When objects occur with cremations, what type of objects are they? (do they tend to be burnt or unburnt?)

Where objects are preserved in early medieval cremations, they are always burnt. The objects found in cremation graves are the same as in inhumation graves, with the exception of weapons. Weapons don't occur in cremations. Otherwise,

it's mostly personal objects, ceramics possibly filled with food but also pieces of meat (pig remains at Broechem) but also objects with a symbolic meaning were put in the grave by the audience, for example, decorated antler disk amulets. We interpret these symbolic objects in the context of ancestral belief.

Site case study

Which site in your research area featuring cremation burials deserves more attention, and why?

In Flanders at this moment Broechem. This cemetery contains the largest amount of cremations and is recently excavated with attention to cremated remains: all of them are sampled and analysed. Cremations cover a large time frame at this site: from the fifth to mid-seventh century. There's still plenty of research possibilities. But I hope future excavations will reveal more early medieval cemeteries with cremation burials so that comparisons between the sites and further research will be possible. The more research, the more answers to actual questions will be given.

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Cremation Practices in Early Medieval Southern Germany

Raimund Masanz

In early medieval Southern Germany cremation was an exception. Amongst thousands of inhumation burials only very few cremations have been excavated. Possible reasons for their existence and their small number are considered in this chapter. There is a concentration of cremation in present-day Northern Bavaria where they occur on three larger cemeteries. At least there, cremation seems to have been an optional way of burying deceased family or group members. The attempt to provide a unified explanation for the existence and the later disappearance of cremations in Southern Germany is considered critically.

Merovingian period, Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, cemeteries, cremation, forms of deposition

Introduction

Femke Lippok: How did you get into the study of early medieval cremation graves?

Raimund Masanz: The main focus of my studies of Frühgeschichtliche Archäologie (early historical archaeology) at the Albert Ludwig University of Freiburg was the Early Middle Ages, especially the Merovingian period. When I was trying to find a research topic for my Master's thesis in 2006 and was looking through publications of early medieval cemeteries that interested me, I stumbled upon two special burial grounds: Kleinlangheim and Dittenheim, both situated in Northern Bavaria. In each of them, early medieval cremation graves were found. After what I had learned about early medieval cemeteries in Germany up to that point, this surprised me since such cemeteries are supposed to contain only inhumation graves! It was at that moment that I decided to take a closer look at the phenomenon of the early medieval cremations in Southern Germany.

FL: So what is the broader prevalence and character of cremation burials in early medieval Southern Germany?

RM: For my Master's thesis, I collected the then-published evidence for cremation graves in Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, and the southern part of Hesse. In those regions, the cremations are not evenly distributed. There are two main concentrations: most of the cremation burials were found in the Main region in Northern Bavaria.

Some are located at the Danube and her tributaries. The southern parts of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg yielded no evidence of early medieval cremation burials.

Shortly after the completion of the thesis in 2007, but before its publication (Masanz 2010), I learned of another interesting burial: a bi-ritual grave at the cemetery of Hessigheim in Baden-Württemberg (Stork and Wahl 2006), which is outside the main distribution, at the River Neckar. Near Hessigheim, there is the better-known cemetery of Pleidelsheim where Ursula Koch documented possible traces of an early medieval cremation (Koch 2001); but the interpretation of this archaeological feature leaves room for doubt: the cremated remains (human bones?) cannot conclusively be assigned to the early medieval cemetery based on the information given in the publication of the cemetery (Masanz 2010: 329; cf. Koch 2001: 438–439).

Most of the burial places containing cremations were located in rural regions. Exceptions are a bi-ritual (mixed-rite) grave at Frankfurt (Hampel 1994; Wamers 2015) and a cremation cemetery in Großprüfening near Regensburg thus near an important crossing of the River Danube and near an urban centre that retained its importance from the Roman period to the Early Middle Ages (Eichinger 2006; Eichinger and Losert 2003).

The chronological focus of the cremations lies in the younger part of the Merovingian Period (up to the seventh century CE). There are only about one hundred early medieval cremation burials in my research area. Against the thousands upon thousands of early medieval inhumation graves many of them located at large burial grounds, that is a very small number. So, in a macro perspective, cremation was an exception in Southern Germany.

There are three different kinds of burial sites containing cremation burials:

1. Larger cemeteries with mostly inhumation burials containing some cremations, like Kleinlangheim (Pescheck 1996), Wenigumstadt (Stauch 2004), and Dittenheim (Haas-Gebhard 1998), all three of them in Northern Bavaria.
2. One exclusively cremation cemetery, the aforementioned cemetery at Großprüfening (dating from the second half of the sixth century to the first quarter of the seventh century CE) (Losert 2011). This is the only one of its kind in Southern Germany.
3. Then there are seemingly isolated cremation burials mostly located within inhumation-grave burial sites. Notably, in Frankfurt the cremation of a child was found in the context of a church building and deposited within a rich inhumation grave of a young girl (Wamers 2015).

The relationship between cremations and inhumations

FL: So, cremation is clearly the minority practice and absent from most burial sites. What more can we learn about the relationships between cremations and inhumations on the same sites and even in the same grave context?

RM: Most of the cremations are found on larger burial grounds where inhumations predominate. The cremation cemetery of Großprüfening is – as stated earlier – the exception (Figure 9.6).

In Dittenheim (Figure 9.2) and Wenigumstadt (Figure 9.3), cemeteries with about 248 and 290 published graves, several cremations were situated in areas between inhumation graves. In the burial ground of Kleinlangheim with about 299 published graves (Figure 9.1), cremations were scattered over the whole area, sometimes in close connection with inhumation graves. Particularly noteworthy in this respect is grave 212 in Kleinlangheim (Figure 9.4) where the cremated bones of an individual were scattered in a pit large enough for an inhumation and alongside the inhumed body of a male adult (grave 211). There are four burial places exhibiting single cremations, which are deposited with an inhumed body or bodies in a shared grave (Ergolding, Frankfurt, Kleinwelzheim, and Hessigheim) (Masanz 2010: 346).

At Kleinlangheim, Dittenheim, and Wenigumstadt, cremations sometimes were buried in the pits of older inhumation graves (Masanz 2010: 346) (cf. Figure 9.5). In a few cases a secondary opening of an inhumation grave took place before a cremation was buried stratigraphically above the inhumation (Masanz 2010: 348–350). These instances may indicate that there had been a significant period between the two interments. In some other cases, it is possible to determine the chronological gap between the associated cremations and inhumations by ways of dating buried grave goods, and in those cases the gaps seem not to have been very large. In such cases it is possible to assume that there was an association/relationship during life between the cremated person and the inhumed person. The precise nature of this relationship is not deducible from the archaeological data, but it is highly likely that the deposition of the later cremation burial into the older inhumation was not an arbitrary choice. The already mentioned bi-ritual burial 212/211 (Figure 9.4) together with the bi-ritual burials at other places (Ergolding, Frankfurt, Kleinwelzheim, and Hessigheim) are a further fact that should be acknowledged in this regard. At least some of the cremated and inhumed persons had a closer social relationship during life.

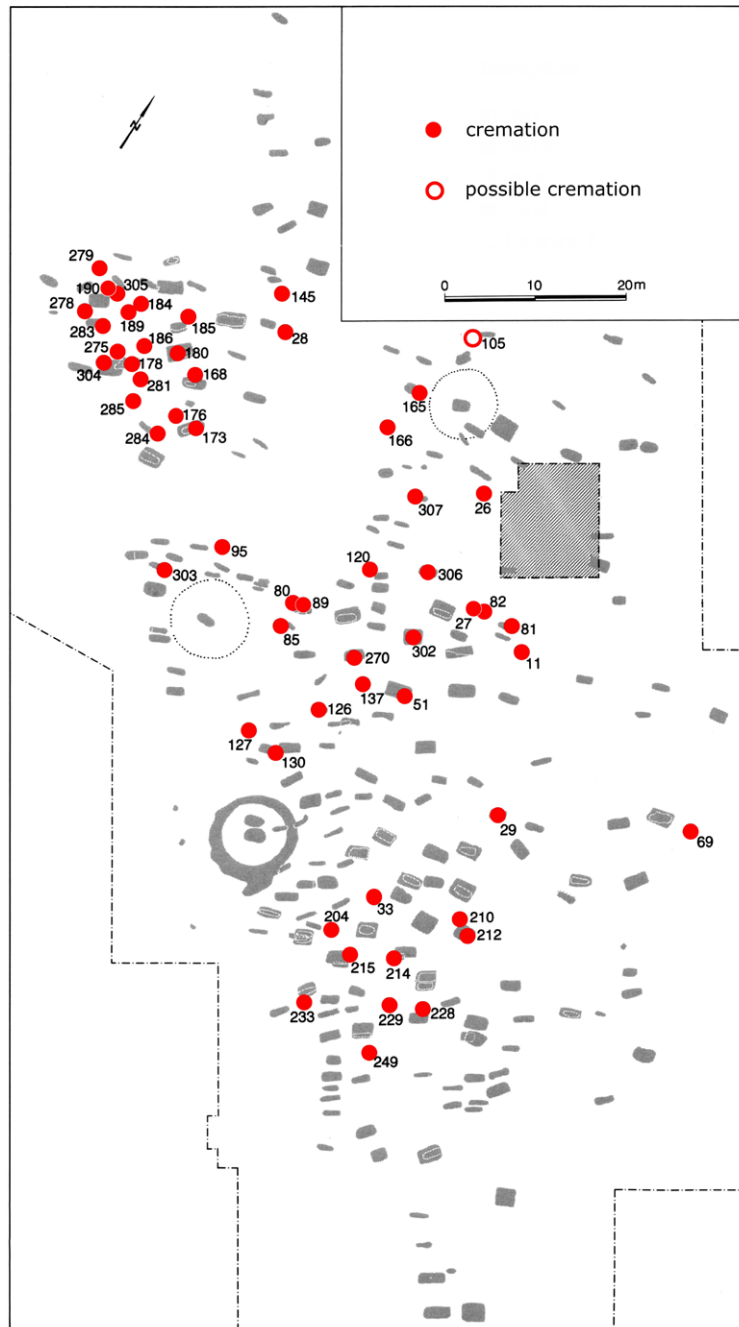


Figure 9.1: Distribution of the cremations on the cemetery of Kleinlangheim (after Pescheck 1996: plate 148)

Howard Williams: What is your take on these two modes of burial existing at the same time within the same burial repertoire?

RM: I think that at least in Kleinlangheim people had the choice to be cremated or inhumed. In the local settlement, there must have been a common attitude towards cremation that allowed both disposal methods to be present on the common burial ground. So, from a macro perspective, cremation was exceptional in Southern

Germany, but in some regional or local contexts, one had a choice whether to be cremated or inhumed.

Explanatory models

Howard Williams: What is the generally accepted explanation for the occurrence of cremations in Southern Germany?

RM: There are several different explanations mainly concerned with ethnically determined burial practices.

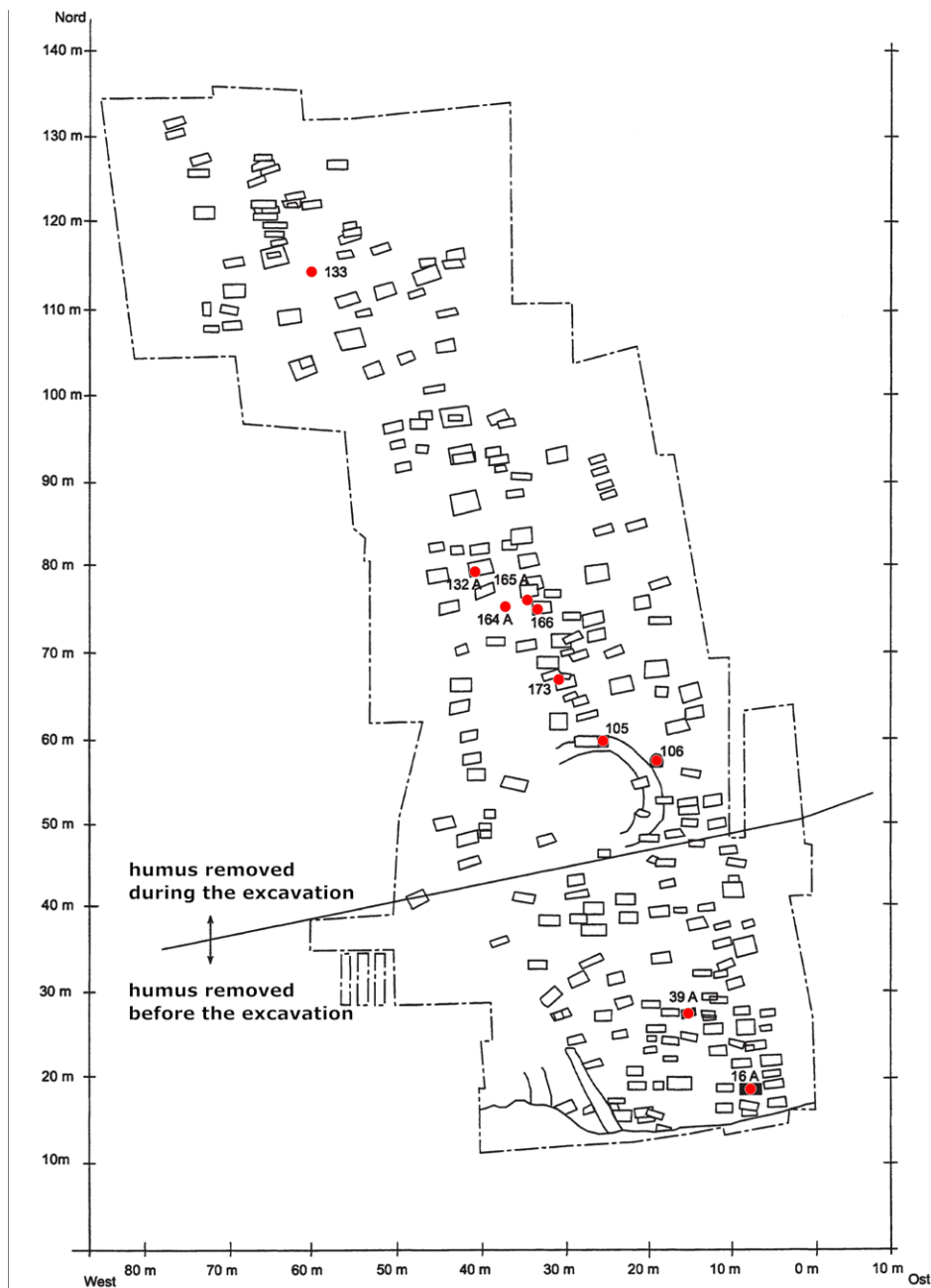


Figure 9.2: Distribution of the cremations on the cemetery of Dittenheim (after Haas-Gebhard 1998: 103 fig. 27)

The Slavic territories and Northern Germany have been suggested as possible areas of origin of these practices. The basis for those considerations has been the phenomenon of cremation itself as well as the ethnic interpretation of grave objects (ceramic vessels played a major role).

FL: In Southern Germany an ethnic influence from the east and north is a consideration in some interpretations. How did people decide whether it was an eastern or northern influence when clearly the act of cremation cannot be exclusively assigned to just one of those regions as cremation occurs in both the east and the north?

RM: The publication on the cemetery of Kleinlangheim (Pescheck 1996; cf. Losert 1991, 1996) is very informative in this respect. Researchers thought the cremations to be of Slavic origin because of the ceramics they contained. Handmade pottery was interpreted as Slavic in contrast to 'Frankish' wheel thrown vessels, but it's clearly not as simple (cf. Masanz 2010: 362–364). While they found a vessel in Kleinlangheim, that is very likely of the so-called 'Donau Typus', a type of ceramic vessels made and distributed mainly in Slavic territories, this vessel originated from an inhumation grave in Kleinlangheim, not from a cremation grave. The spectrum of the pottery forms

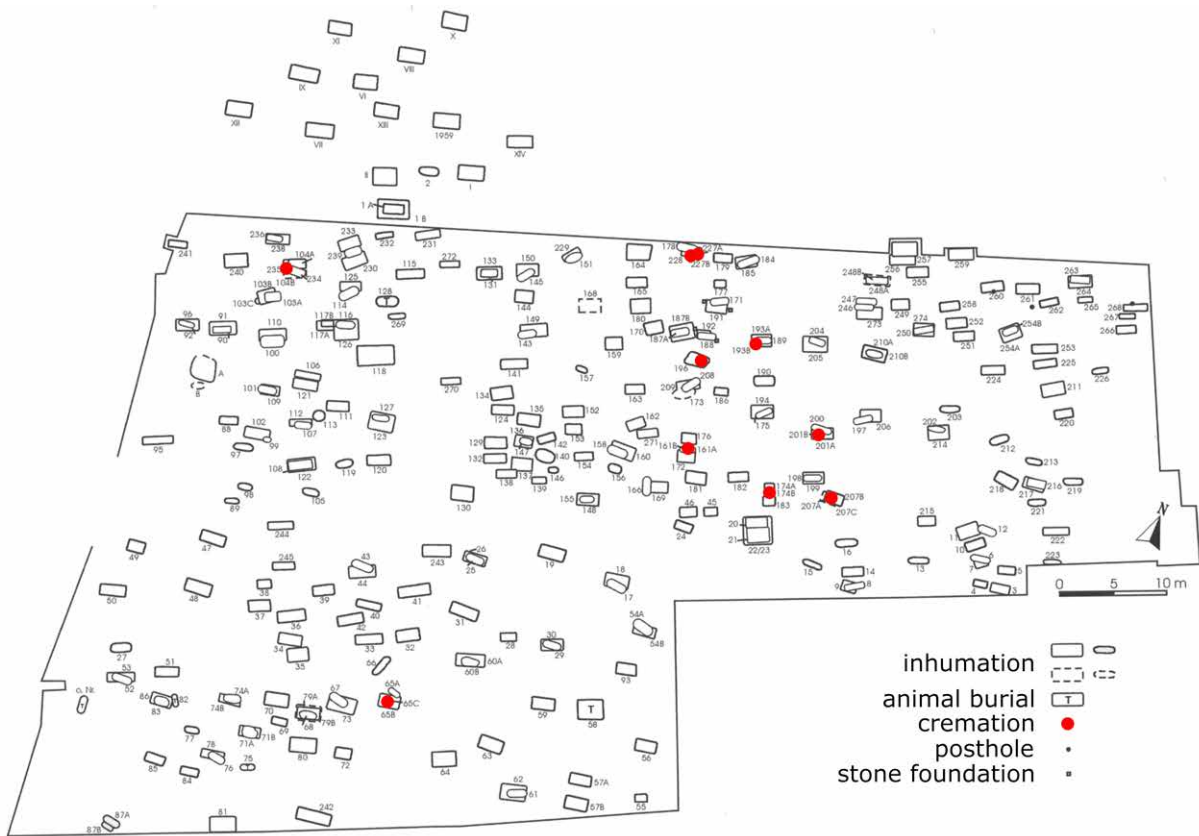


Figure 9.3: Distribution of the cremations on the cemetery of Wenigumstadt (after Stauch 2004: 10 fig. 3; 242 fig. 106)

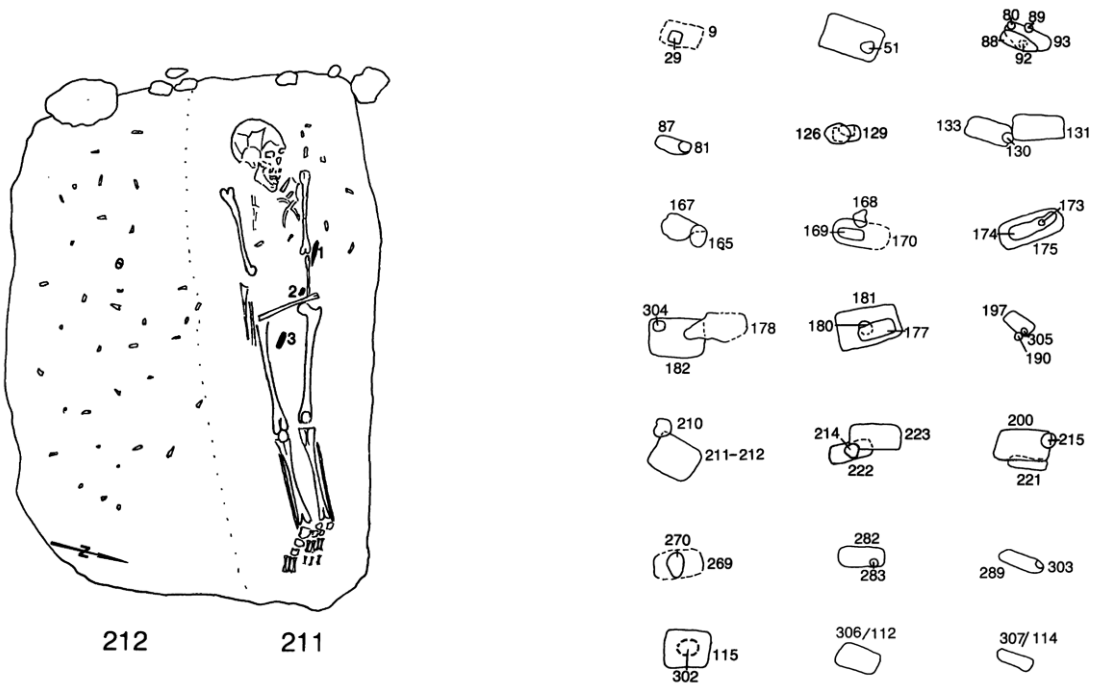


Figure 9.4: Bi-ritual burial 212/211 at Kleinlangheim cemetery (Pescheck 1996: plate 82)

Figure 9.5: Superimpositions of cremations over inhumations at Kleinlangheim cemetery (Masanz 2010: 348, after Pescheck 1996: suppl. 1)

found with cremations lies clearly within the normal spectrum one would expect to find in any inhumation grave in the cemetery of Kleinlangheim and beyond in the early medieval cemeteries of the Main region.

HW: Just to clarify, has anyone suggested that these are simply very conservative late Roman people persisting in the area? Because that is another way that an ethnic or cultural influence has been argued elsewhere.

RM: There was a discussion of possible continuity of population, particularly for Kleinlangheim. In Kleinlangheim, not far away from the early medieval burial ground a cremation cemetery of the Roman period was found where the youngest graves are inhumations from the Migration Period (Pescheck 1978). The question arises: was there a local or regional population continuity and, with that, a continuity of cremation? Many of the inhumations and most of the cremations of the early medieval cemetery cannot be dated with certainty. The method of 'horizontal stratigraphy' is not applicable, as there are no clear sequences in the growth of the burial ground. It is not possible to bridge the chronological gap between the youngest graves of the Roman period cemetery and the early medieval cemetery completely. An argument for continuity may be seen in the grave types prevailing in both cemeteries: most of them contained no urns. (In the Main region, cremation burials without ceramic urns are dominant in the Roman-period cemeteries.) However, further links between the two cemeteries of Kleinlangheim are not detectable.

In spite of all those problems, I would not rule out the continuity hypothesis completely. Chronological gaps established on the basis of typological chronology may not be as large as they were once thought to be. So, there might have been a continuity in the local population, perhaps a reduced population which is very hard to detect in the archaeological record. In this context, the knowledge about cremation could have been passed on from generation to generation.

Still, the lack of demonstrable links between Migration Period and Early Middle Ages is also observable for another region in Bavaria: the region near the River Danube around the cities of Regensburg, Ingolstadt, and Straubing illustrates this point, for in the Migration Period, mainly in the fourth and fifth centuries, cremation cemeteries were in use at Friedenhain (Lkr. Straubing-Bogen, Lower Bavaria) and Freystadt-Forchheim (Lkr. Neumarkt, Upper Palatinate, Bavaria) (Masanz 2016). However, the large early medieval inhumation cemetery of Straubing 'Bajuwarenstraße' (Lower Bavaria), which was founded in the fifth century, did not contain a single cremation, though located only a few kilometres away

from the cemetery of Friedenhain. And only two of the oldest inhumations from Straubing 'Bajuwarenstraße' yielded ceramic vessels that are comparable to handmade pottery typical for the cremation cemetery of Friedenhain (Masanz 2016: 189–191).

As a result, in the Upper Palatinate region as well as in the Main region, the transition from the Migration Period to the Early Middle Ages, from a time of prevailing cremations to the large inhumation grave cemeteries, remains obscure. It is difficult to establish beyond reasonable doubt that the population that had buried their cremated dead on the Roman period and Migration Period cemeteries of Kleinlangheim, Freystadt-Forchheim, and Friedenhain then later buried in the inhumation cemeteries of the region. Continuity is possible, but not probable and should play a role in further considerations.

FL: In your work, you also discuss some more incidental interpretations for cremations, could you say something about what kinds of explanations people came up with?

RM: Early works about the south German cremations – written down before the proper excavations and analyses of the relevant graves – proposed some kind of *Sati* as explanation for the occurrence of cremations (Dannheimer 1971: 78–84). *Sati* is a term that refers to the Hindu practice of widow-burning. At the present state of our knowledge, anthropological analyses do not confirm such an assumption. The consideration of the occurrence of a kind of *Sati*-practice was an ad-hoc interpretation, which in the end, does not hold true.

FL: What about witches (i.e. cremation afforded to those deemed 'dangerous' or 'deviant')?

RM: One strand of interpretations emphasised the exceptionality of cremation and considered if they could indicate the funerals of criminals in the broadest sense. And there are actually written sources for the Early Middle Ages that state for some crimes that they should be punished by the burning of the offenders. However, as the deceased were buried in the local burial site with appropriate care, they were treated as normal members of their societies. It is, therefore, not likely that burning them was part of a punishment ritual (by the way, not a very cheap one, if the use of firewood is taken into account). Deviants would not have been buried in the community's cemetery either, as they no longer belonged to that community (cf. Masanz 2010: 368–370 with literature references). For example, later during the Middle Ages the remains of burnt sorcerers and witches were scattered in all four directions or dumped in a river. Murderers and thieves were buried next to the place of execution. The cemetery of the community is a place of memory. Deviants are no suitable objects of such memory. Criminals don't

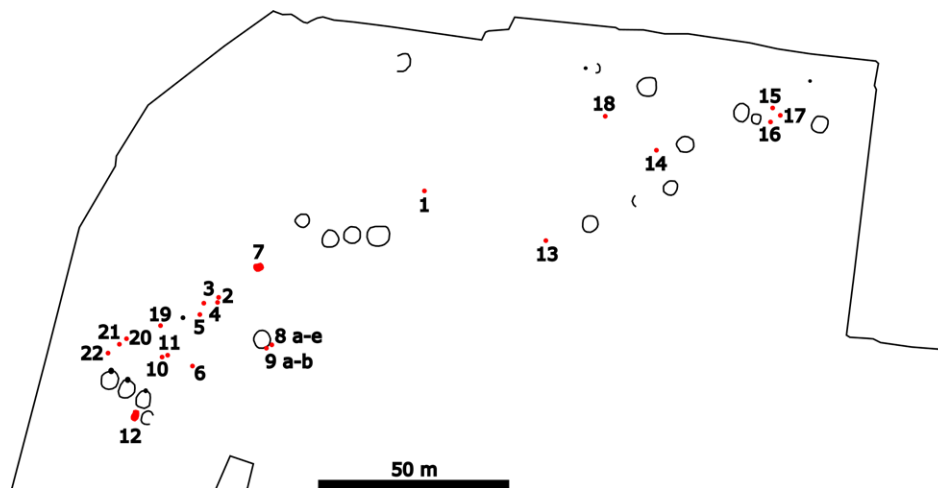


Figure 9.6: Cremation cemetery of Großprüfening (after Losert 2011: 476 fig. 1; Röhrer-Ertl *et al.* 2009: 143 fig. 1)

belong to the community any longer, they are excluded from society, and it's very likely that even during the Early Middle Ages, like in the High Middle Ages until modern times, executed criminals were buried not in the cemetery but on its outskirts or on the place of the execution itself, if they were buried at all.

HW: And because you've mentioned these historical sources, could you elaborate on them, what historical sources have influenced the interpretation of cremations, and what is your take/approach on/to that?

RM: In respect to the possible cremation of criminals, the historical sources would be law texts (cf. Masanz 2010: 369 tab. 15). As the south German cremations, being proper burials, cannot be ascribed to criminals, the information given by such law texts have no relevance to the explanation of the occurrence of cremations in Southern Germany.

But there is a second strand of interpretations based on texts, namely the interpretation of cremation as an ethnically bound phenomenon. The ascription of cremations in Kleinlangheim to a Slavic population is derived from texts of the ninth century and of developments mainly of the ninth and tenth centuries in this region, when eastern Bavaria was a border region between the Frankish empire and Slavic populations (Losert 1991; cf. Masanz 2010: 324–325). The situation of much later times is thus projected back into the sixth and seventh centuries.

FL: Since you already bring up the ethnic interpretations that were proposed in the past, what is your take on them?

RM: I don't think ethnic interpretations will lead us to a better understanding of the role of the cremated persons

in the populations buried at the relevant south German cemeteries. Beyond that, attempts at ethnic interpretations are not always convincing, like the example of Kleinlangheim shows. The cremations in southern Germany occur, as stated earlier, on common burial grounds together with inhumations, sometimes in the same grave. The objects found in cremation graves do not differ from those found with inhumed bodies. Thus, a tradition that knew cremation *and* inhumation was a local or regional, not an ethnically bound tradition. The only exception from this might be the small group of cremations at Großprüfening (Figure 9.6), the only exclusively cremation burial ground in Southern Germany. The site is located at the crossing of the River Danube, an important traffic junction. Nearby Regensburg was an urban centre, which might have attracted people from other European regions. At the time I wrote my Master's thesis, sufficient information was only published for twelve graves from Großprüfening. Meanwhile twenty-two graves are known, some of them containing cremations of more than one individual (Röhrer-Ertl *et al.* 2009; Losert 2011). A cemetery with cremations only gives the impression of a certain degree of seclusion or an exclusive practice. And the graves contained few objects linked to the local material culture, so there might have been a non-local exclusive group of people interred at Großprüfening. However, it is not possible to determine the origin of this population and their role in the Regensburg area is not explained. Did they stay in that area over a longer period, or did they travel through the area on a regular basis, or was it a single event that led to the creation of the cemetery? The cremation cemetery of Großprüfening is therefore an exception within the exceptional; it yielded very little material. So, an ethnic interpretation of the population that buried in this cemetery seems to me a not very promising undertaking.

HW: So rather than one uniform explanation for all cremations, you consider that there may have been lots of explanations why people cremated or inhumed?

RM: That is correct.

HW: Elsewhere, the ending of cremation practices has been linked to Christianisation, is that interpretation relevant?

RM: A single burial cannot be interpreted as Christian or unchristian, even if it contains Christian symbols. And there is no Christian doctrine that would banish cremations once and for all. So, there might have been regions and phases during the Early Middle Ages where and when cremation was possible for Christians. We do not know anything about that.

In rural early medieval communities, funerals involving cremations and inhumations might have been family business, bound to family traditions. A clear commitment to Christian doctrine and lifestyle might not have been necessary in such communities over a long time. In urban families of high social rank and with political functions, on the other hand, the display of a Christian belief and lifestyle could have been a means in politics. Especially because urban centres have sometimes hosted larger Christian communities early on.

In later times, missionising was used as a means to politically subjugate and integrate peoples and territories (cf. Weikmann 2002 regarding the Saxon Wars of Charlemagne; Knol, this volume). Christianisation thus could become an extension of political power. It was used to gain control over populations and their territories. The enforcement of one tradition – like inhumation burial – against other or older traditions – like cremations – can be used as a means of political power, to gain control over people. To break up family traditions might then have been in the interest of the political potentates. That could explain a situation as in Kleinlangheim, where persons presumably belonging together were treated differently after their death.

In this scenario, it was not the Christian belief system that was the main driving factor, but political circumstances. And such situations might have been different from region to region and changed dynamically on the local or regional level. So, if you look at the local or regional level, the development on this level may differ from the overall development.

Tracing a minority rite

HW: Cremations are not very numerous in your region; how might contrasting archaeological visibility affect this pattern?

RM: First, the ritual of cremation is a crucial point in taphonomic terms. For example, to what degree the bodies are cremated is important: if the chemical alteration of the bones is not complete, they are prone to chemical destruction in sandy soils and they dissolve. And if they are not deposited in an urn, that effect might be even worse.

Cremations are more likely to be destroyed through agricultural activities, as they are often not placed as deep in the ground as inhumations. So, in regions, where both ritual forms are present, there is a bias in favour of inhumation graves.

Regarding the bi-ritual row grave cemeteries of Southern Germany, the expectations of the excavators may have increased this bias: Searching for inhumation graves, which are rectangular structures, c. 2m long, and 0.6–1m wide, shallow and small incineration graves with only few bone fragments have perhaps been overlooked. (From this may also follow a bias in favour of such cremations which are located in, above or adjacent to inhumations.) At the southern part of the Dittenheim cemetery, the topsoil layer was removed with a bulldozer before the excavations (Haas-Gebhard 1998: 94) in order to find the expected features of inhumation graves. Through the mechanical removal of the soil, cremation graves might have been completely destroyed.

On some row grave cemeteries, like in Westheim in Bavaria (Reiß 1994), scattered burnt human remains have been occasionally found. But grave structures have not been detected. Such remains are not datable and may have come from prehistoric cremation cemeteries as well. Anja Pütz was able to identify one unfurnished early medieval cremation at Gaukönigshofen with the help of radiocarbon dating (Pütz 2019: 278–285). But it is very difficult to detect cremation graves after the excavations during the scientific analysis of the excavations' documentation.

Therefore, first and foremost, the excavators have to be aware of the fact that even on exclusively early medieval cemeteries, there might occur cremation graves. What is not documented during excavations, can be found afterwards only with considerable effort expended.

HW: What about the misdating of cremations?

RM: Many of the early medieval cremations yielded no datable grave objects. In order to date the cremations of Kleinlangheim, the method of so-called horizontal stratigraphy was applied, which relies on the premise that the succession of deaths is reflected in a spatial progression of cemetery occupancy. This method cannot be used in Kleinlangheim because features of the same dating are scattered all over the cemetery, and – vice versa – in a given part of the cemetery, graves of different dates can be gathered together. My re-evaluation of the situation showed: most of the cremations are not precisely datable.

Table 9.1: Sites mentioned in the text (Lkr. = Landkreis) (regarding the number of cremations cf. Masanz 2010: 327–330)

Site	Early medieval cremations	Geographical data (UTM)
Dittenheim, Lkr. Weißenburg-Gunzenhausen, Middle Franconia, State of Bavaria	9	32U 630915 5435333
Ergolding, Lkr. Landshut, Lower Bavaria, State of Bavaria	1	33U 291050 5385014
Frankfurt am Main, State of Hesse	1	32U 477278 5550971
Gaukönigshofen, Lkr. Würzburg, Lower Franconia, State of Bavaria	1	32U 572210 5498344
Großprüfening, city of Regensburg, Upper Palatinate, State of Bavaria	22	33U 283131 5432824
Hellmitzheim, city of Iphofen, Lkr. Kitzingen, Lower Franconia, State of Bavaria	uncertain	32U 595644 5502638
Hessigheim, Lkr. Ludwigsburg, State of Baden-Württemberg	1	32U 513756 5426948
Kleinlangheim, Lkr. Kitzingen, Lower Franconia, State of Bavaria	55	32U 592549 5513882
Kleinwelzheim, city of Seligenstadt, Lkr. Offenbach, State of Hesse	1	32U 498235 5543534
Pleidelsheim, Lkr. Ludwigsburg, State of Baden-Württemberg	uncertain	32U 515007 5422906
Schretzheim, city of Dillingen an der Donau, Lkr. Dillingen, Swabia, State of Bavaria	2	32U 611472 5383016
Tapfheim, Lkr. Donau-Ries, Swabia, State of Bavaria	1	32U 623909 5392547
Uissigheim, city of Kilsheim, Lkr. Tauberbischofsheim, State of Baden-Württemberg	1	32U 537562 5502009
Wenigumstadt, city of Großostheim, Lkr. Aschaffenburg, Lower Franconia, State of Bavaria	5	32U 502981 5526776
Westheim, Lkr. Weißenburg-Gunzenhausen, Middle Franconia, State of Bavaria	uncertain	32U 621508 5429125

There is another stupendous case of misdating. Anja Pütz recently published her PhD about burials in the Main region of Bavaria and she found a new early medieval cremation that was buried without any objects in a Hallstatt period feature (Pütz 2019: 278). Only radiocarbon dating showed that this cremation is of early medieval age. So, radiocarbon dating might help to identify more early medieval cremations.

FL: Your research has shown that often south German cremation burials only consist of very small amounts of bone. Could that be explained through post-depositional practices, or might there also be a social practice at play here which makes people deposit only small amounts of bone?

RM: The problem is, that my work relies completely on the information given in the existing literature rather than new osteological analyses. Details of how cremated bone was collected during the excavations, if sieving was involved and if so, which sieves were used, are not often given. So, you cannot exclude the possibility that the amount of bone is determined by the excavation technique in the first place. Additionally, at the time of their excavation, many of the cremations seem to have been in a poor condition. The representation of body parts is also not regularly mentioned, let alone detailed observations about the degree of heat alteration of the bones from different body parts. Bones that were not completely altered by heat, as described above, are prone to degrade in acidic soils; this may have played a role in the reduction of bone material.

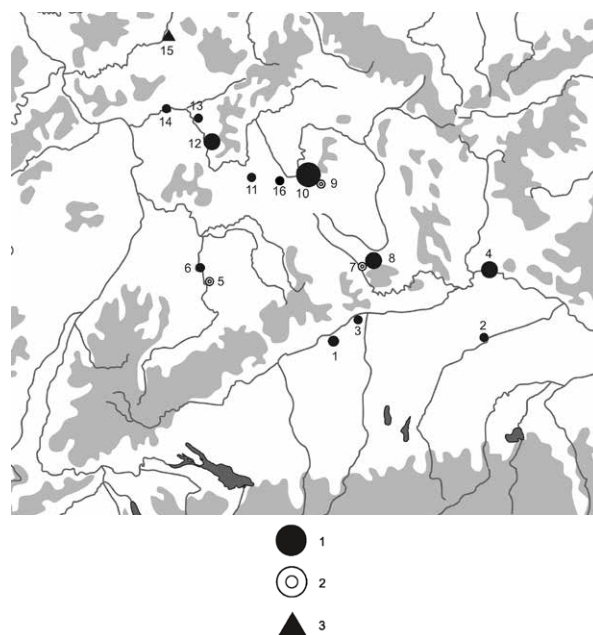


Figure 9.7: Distribution of cremations from the Merovingian period. 1 Schretzheim; 2 Ergolding; 3 Tapfheim; 4 Großprüfening; 5 Pleidelsheim; 6 Hessigheim; 7 Westheim; 8 Dittenheim; 9 Hellmitzheim; 10 Kleinlangheim; 11 Uissigheim; 12 Wenigumstadt; 13 Kleinwelzheim; 14 Frankfurt; 15 Gießen; 16 Gaukönigshofen (after Masanz 2010: 333 fig. 1, with additions; base map: M. Kinsky). (Information about each site are given in Masanz 2010: 382–393.) – Filled circle: proved cremation; double circle: doubtful cremation; triangle: outside the area of study

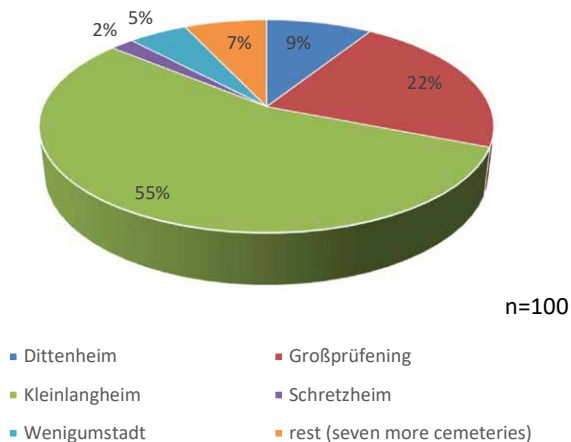


Figure 9.8: Distribution of the south German cremations over the cemeteries/sites. The category 'rest' includes the seven sites of Ergolding, Frankfurt, Gaukönigshofen, Hessigheim, Kleinwelzheim, Tapfheim, and Uissigheim

There are many different possibilities regarding the reduction of cremated bones during burial rituals, during the time the bones are buried in the ground and (not least of all) during excavation and analysis by archaeologists. To detect hints of burial rituals through the veil of all later natural processes and human actions on the basis of the sparse information given in the relevant publications seems to me nearly impossible.

HW: What methodological advancements could help further develop our view on early medieval cremation graves?

RM: Refined dating of the graves, especially of graves without any datable grave objects, would increase our knowledge. The radiocarbon dating of burnt bone – if further developed and applied with supplementary analyses of the bones – could help in this respect.

A true interdisciplinary way of working and thinking during the excavation and later the analysis of the cremations is also important: archaeologists, physical anthropologists, specialists for radiocarbon dating, specialists for wood and charcoal, zooarchaeologists, specialists for soil science all working together – not only archaeologists using data from those specialists.

FL: What sites would you select for radiocarbon dating if you had ten free ^{14}C dates?

RM: That is a very tough question because ten is by far too few. First of all, I would only date five features because you have to at least double date each feature. If you can

take even more samples from one feature, that would be even better. I would mainly date cremations deposited in, above or under inhumations. And in those contexts, I would date both the relevant inhumations and the cremations (so you see, ten is too few).

What would also be interesting to date is cremations with datable grave objects. That would allow us to re-evaluate the radiocarbon dates against the current typological chronology. And of course, I would also try to date cremations containing no grave objects at all, mainly to ensure, that they are early medieval.

FL: What about stable isotope analysis?

RM: I think the data that could be derived from stable isotope analysis won't change our view on cremations dramatically, although it may well provide further supplemental data. We have to interpret this evidence like any other kind of archaeological information. But of course, these methods, as they are increasingly applied to burnt bones, will make cremations even more interesting (Veselka, this volume). If you have a look at the research history of cremations, fifty years ago, cremations were not considered to be very important at all. They were not studied properly at all; everyone studied only the inhumation graves of the early medieval period. So perhaps isotopic studies can help us further the interest in cremation burials.

FL: What new ideas or developments offer exciting avenues for early medieval cremation studies?

RM: As early medieval cremations are relatively rare in Southern Germany they are not a central research topic. The new publication of the child burial at Frankfurt by Egon Wamers (2015) or the analysis of new findings in the work of Anja Pütz (2019) are notable, although they didn't lead to a broader discussion of the phenomenon as a whole. There have been no further cemeteries as Kleinlangheim, Dittenheim, and Wenigumstadt excavated, although future fresh discoveries may stimulate the debate.

As in burnt bone, the organic matrix is missing, the possibilities offered by modern aDNA analysis, Sr-analysis etc. may be limited. This restriction, however, does not apply as much to inhumations, which are closely linked to some of the cremations (regarding both superimpositions and bi-ritual graves). Maybe, if applied to these inhumations, such methods would increase our data basis and bring the discussion forward.

Regarding the application of the radiocarbon method to incinerated bone material I am, as already mentioned above, a little bit cautious. But further developed, this method may not only increase the number of known

Figure 9.9: Grave forms at the Kleinlangheim cemetery (Masanz 2010: 342–344)

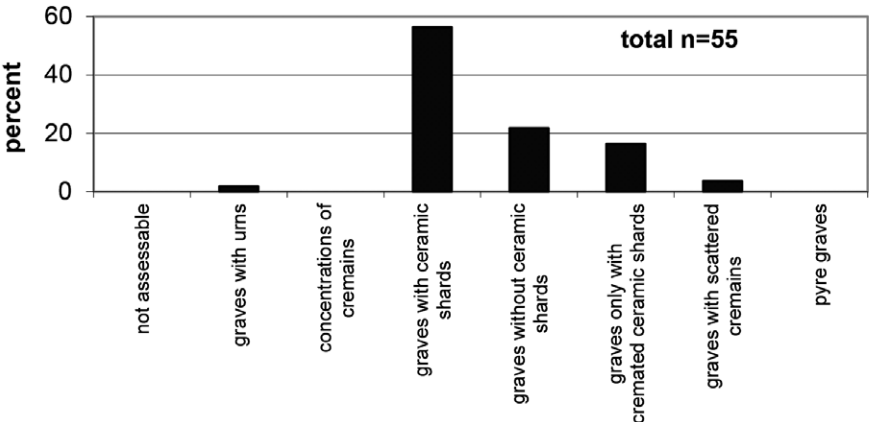


Figure 9.10: Grave forms at the Dittenheim cemetery (Masanz 2010: 342–344)

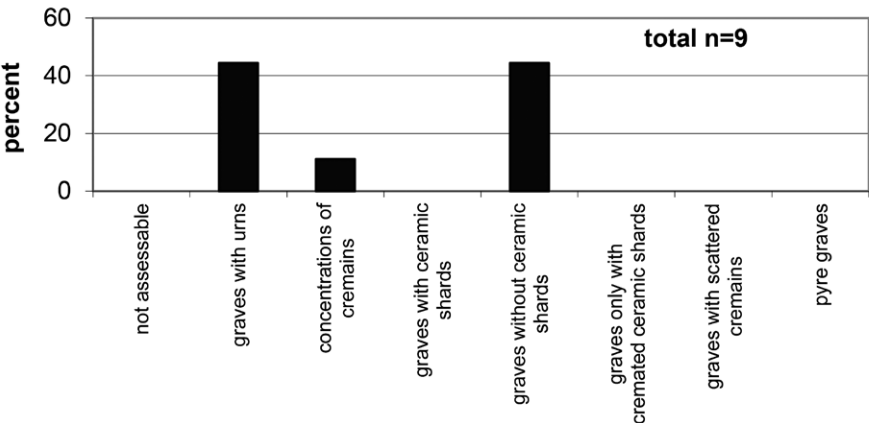
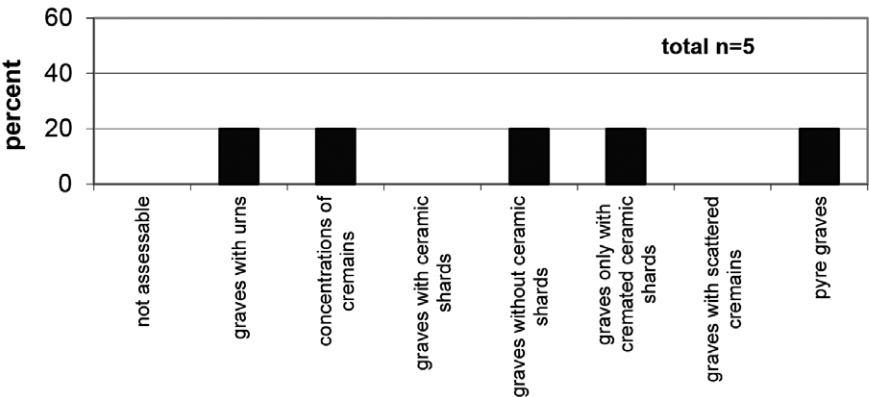


Figure 9.11: Grave forms at the Wenigumstadt cemetery (Masanz 2010: 342–344)



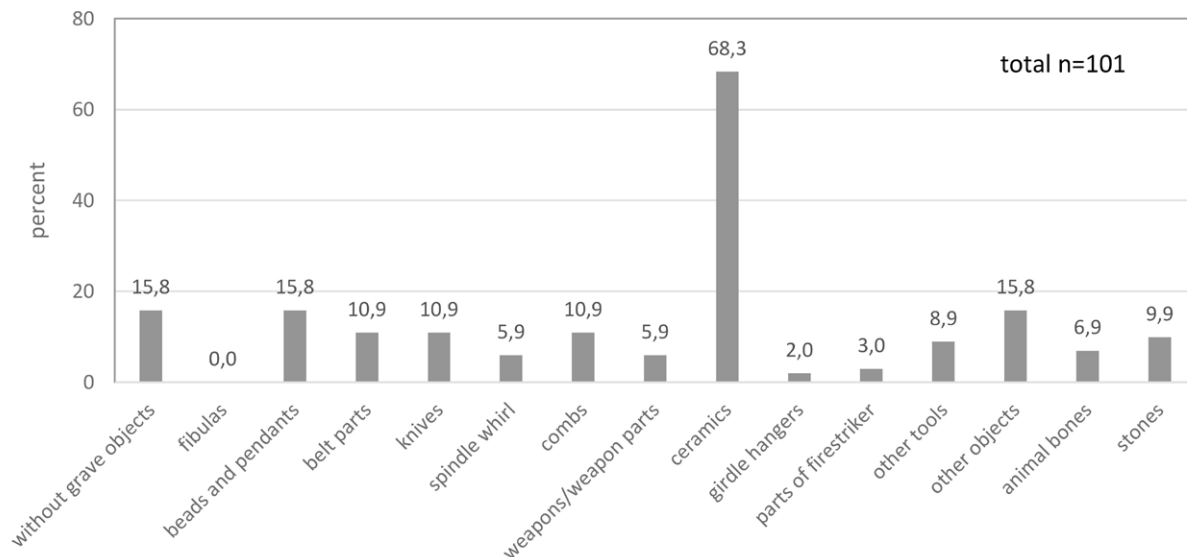
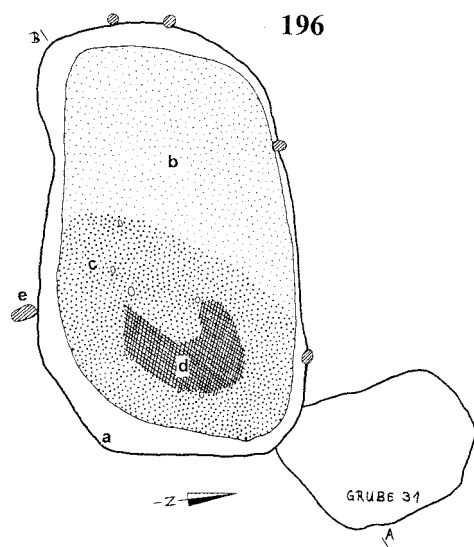


Figure 9.12: Spectrum and frequency of grave goods from the cremations in Southern Germany (after Masanz 2010: 359, with additions)



early medieval cremations but will ultimately perhaps also help to establish a more reliable chronological distribution of the cremations. That would be a major development, especially as most of the cremations are not easily datable on the basis of grave objects.

The research in Southern Germany may profit from findings and developments in other regions, where cremation was not as rare, and achievements there may stimulate further research in the periphery of the distribution of cremation.

HW: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

RM: In my opinion cremations are more difficult to analyse than inhumation burials. Therefore, we have to be more careful in our statements and have to stay very open-minded with respect to possible interpretations and explanations.

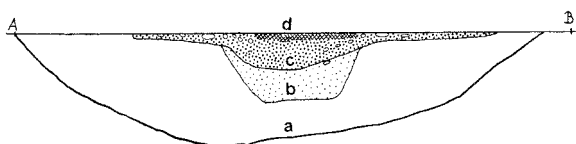


Figure 9.13: Wenigumstadt cemetery, possible pyre remains (Stauch 2004: plate 151)

Key data: Southern Germany

Where do cremations occur in Southern Germany?

As a study area, I chose Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, and the southern part of Hesse. The distribution of the cremation graves there is not even (Figure 9.7 with Table 9.1; Figure 9.8). Most of them have been found in northern Bavaria and near the rivers Main and Danube. The southern parts of Bavaria and of Baden-Württemberg yielded no cremations at all.

In what quantities do cremations occur in Southern Germany?

The total number of known cremations in the area described above at the time of my study was around ninety, distributed among eleven archaeological sites. Meanwhile, ten more cremations from Großprüfening have been published. In 2019, A. Pütz published one new cremation grave, together with six more uncertain cremations (the latter not considered here) (Figure 9.8).

In what forms are cremations deposited in Southern Germany?

Because of poor preservation, the grave types are not always identifiable. Only a few burials contained ceramic or organic urns. Most of the cremations had been found in smaller unsymmetrical, round or oval pits; in a few cases, rectangular structures were observed. (cf. Figures 9.9–9.11)

What types of containers are associated with cremations? (e.g.: urns, wooden containers, leather pouches?)

Features without any traces of ceramic vessels or only burnt ceramic sherds existed, which most probably belong to the category of the *Brandgrubengrab*, where bones, grave offerings and débris of the pyre were deposited in a simple pit.

A number of graves contained ceramic sherds, but it was not possible to decide whether they came from urns or other grave vessels. So, the graves have been categorised by me as ‘graves with ceramic vessels’ in order to indicate the possibility that at least some of them may have been badly preserved urn graves.

Some of the graves contained ceramic urns, whereas glass or metal vessels are absent. From the publications, in many cases, it is unclear whether the incinerated remains were only deposited inside the urn, or if parts of the bones and cremated remains from the pyre have also been found outside the vessels. And some of the incinerations had been deposited in organic ‘urns’, inferring from the shape and texture of the bone deposits. But no remains of such urns were documented.

Are there funerary monuments or other structures surrounding cremations in Southern Germany?

In some instances, stones were found in the burials, but only in one grave from the cemetery of Kleinlangheim (grave no. 184) they were clearly part of an underground construction.

Free areas around some of the cremation burials of Kleinlangheim and Dittenheim might indicate traces of grave monuments on the surface.

On the cremation cemetery of Großprüfening near Regensburg, beside the cremation graves, small round ditches (Kreisgräbchen) could be documented, which are most probably older than the cremations and did not belong to the early medieval graves (Losert 2011: 475–476).

In the recently published work of Anja Pütz about Merovingian-period cemeteries near the river Main in northern Bavaria, a new southern German cremation is published on the cemetery of Gaukönigshofen. This cremation was situated in a round ditch of the Hallstatt period, which may have still contained a small mound during the Early Middle Ages. If this was the case, an already existing, ancient tumulus would have been reused in the Early Middle Ages.

In the cemetery of Wenigumstadt, a rectangular pit (2.2m long and 1.3m wide) containing burnt human bones was found (grave no. 196) (Figure 9.13). It showed five small postholes (diameter only c. 4cm) at its edges. Most probably, this feature was the remains of a pyre. That would mean that at least one cremation took place on the burial ground itself. There are no other traces of incineration places in my dataset.

Is there any noteworthy spatial patterning of cremation burials on the sites they occur on?

On the cemetery maps of Kleinlangheim, Dittenheim, and Wenigumstadt, several concentrations of cremations are detectable, the distribution is not even; but cremations have also been found outside these concentrations. This circumstance and the problems surrounding the conservation of cremation graves in the course of time and excavation activities should call for caution regarding the interpretation of this observation.

What trends can be observed regarding the occurrence of cremation burials throughout time in Southern Germany?

Most of the datable features are from the younger Merovingian period (after 600 CE). But it is noteworthy that many of the cremations in Kleinlangheim yielded no chronological indicators (no grave objects, no ¹⁴C dates, no superpositions). And there is a small number of southern German cremations that belongs to the older Merovingian time (before 600 CE) (Masanz 2010: 340 tab. 3).

Where osteological data is available, is there any apparent selection of deceased according to their sex or age?

Overall, the anthropological data is sparse (Masanz 2010: 352–353). Meanwhile, for the cremations of Großprüfening, estimations for age at death and the sex of the deceased are published (Losert 2011; Röhrer-Ertl *et al.* 2009). Yet, this preliminary publication lacks a description of the quality of the human remains as well as a description of the applied anthropological methods. It is not sufficient to allow us to assess the anthropological interpretation (i.e. multiple burials of more than one individual in a depositional structure).

Taking into account also the archaeological observations, there are individuals of different ages and both anthropological sexes under the cremated persons (Table 9.2). But at the site of Wenigumstadt many of the remains seem to be from women.

When objects occur with cremations, what type of objects are they? (do they tend to be burnt or unburnt?)

Ceramic vessels and parts of such vessels are the most common objects associated with cremations in Southern Germany (Figure 9.12). Parts of clothing are relatively rare. There are some belt parts documented, but brooches do not occur at all. Some graves contained glass beads. Parts of bone

combs, knives, and spindle whorls have also been recovered. And in some instances, weapons or components of weapons are observed. Burnt animal bones, as well as pottery with burn marks, presumably are indicators of food offerings. Noteworthy are distal phalanges of bears in some burials at Großprüfening and in the cremation from Frankfurt; they most probably came from bear skins in or with which the deceased were burned (Masanz 2010: 358; Losert 2011: 481–482).

Altogether, there are burnt and unburnt items (like glass beads from a grave in Kleinlangheim, grave no. 302), but often it is not stated in the publications, whether a particular grave object shows traces of burning or not. Charcoal, burnt stones and clay, sometimes also documented in the graves, may stem from the pyre or burning place.

It is important to underline, that, especially in the bi-ritual cemeteries, the spectrum of the grave objects does not differ from that of the inhumation graves.

Table 9.2: Data regarding age at death and sex of the deceased (cf. Masanz 2010: 352–353). The information on the cremations from Großprüfening relies on preliminary publications with insufficiently presented data (Losert 2011; Röhrer-Ertl *et al.* 2009); the complete publication of the cemetery is still pending

Grave	Anthropologically determined sex	Archaeologically determined gender	Age at death
Dittenheim, 16A			probably adult
Dittenheim, 39A	female		probably adult
Dittenheim, 106	probably male		rather adult than mature
Dittenheim, 166		female	
Frankfurt, Dom			child
Großprüfening, 1	not determined	-	child (infans I)
Großprüfening, 2	female	-	adult
Großprüfening, 3	female	-	juvenile
Großprüfening, 4	(1) female (2) male	-	(1) adult (2) adult
Großprüfening, 5	(1) female (2) not determined	-	(1) adult (2) newborn
Großprüfening, 6	(1) female (2) not determined	-	(1) adult (2) newborn
Großprüfening, 7	male	-	mature
Großprüfening, 8	(1) female (2) female (3) male (4) male (5) male (6) female (7) male (8) female (9) male	-	(1) adult (2) juvenile (3) juvenile (4) adult (5) adult (6) juvenile (7) adult (8) adult (9) adult
Großprüfening, 9	(1) male (2) female (3) male (4) female	-	(1) child (infans I) (2) child (infans I) (3) child (infans I) (4) child (infans I)
Großprüfening, 10	(1) male (2) female	-	(1) child (infans I) (2) adult
Großprüfening, 11	(1) male (2) female	-	(1) adult (2) adult
Großprüfening, 12	female	-	adult
Großprüfening, 13	(1) male (2) female	-	(1) child (infans II) (2) adult
Großprüfening, 14	female	-	adult
Großprüfening, 15	(1) male (2) female (3) not determined	-	(1) adult (2) juvenile (3) foetus
Großprüfening, 16	(1) male (2) female	-	(1) adult (2) adult
Großprüfening, 17	(1) not determined (2) female	-	(1) child (infans I) (2) juvenile
Großprüfening, 18	(1) male (2) female	-	(1) juvenile (2) adult
Großprüfening, 19	not determined	-	not determined
Großprüfening, 20	not determined	-	not determined
Großprüfening, 21	not determined	-	not determined
Großprüfening, 22	not determined	-	not determined
Kleinlangheim, 11		female	
Kleinlangheim, 29		female	
Kleinlangheim, 51		female	

Grave	Anthropologically determined sex	Archaeologically determined gender	Age at death
Kleinlangheim, 81		female	
Kleinlangheim, 85	more likely male than female		adult
Kleinlangheim, 89		male	adult
Kleinlangheim, 127			adult
Kleinlangheim, 130			over 30
Kleinlangheim, 165		male	
Kleinlangheim, 173			adult
Kleinlangheim, 178	probably male	female	18–25
Kleinlangheim, 180		female	adult
Kleinlangheim, 184		female	
Kleinlangheim, 189			adult
Kleinlangheim, 210			adult
Kleinlangheim, 228		female	
Kleinlangheim, 233			child
Kleinlangheim, 278		male	
Kleinlangheim, 281			adult
Kleinlangheim, 283	maybe male		adult
Kleinlangheim, 284			adult
Kleinlangheim, 285			child
Kleinlangheim, 302		female	
Kleinlangheim, 305			adult
Kleinlangheim, 307			adult
Klein-Welzheim		male	
Schretzheim, A		female?	adult
Tapfheim	male		30–40
Wenigumstadt, 196	more likely female		adult
Wenigumstadt, 227A/1	more likely female		adult
Wenigumstadt, 227A/2	more likely female		juvenile or adult
Wenigumstadt, 227B	more likely female		adult
Wenigumstadt, 235	more likely female		adult

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Cremation Practices in Merovingian and Carolingian Cemeteries from Northern France

Vanessa Brunet, Erwan Nivez and
Astrid A. Noterman

Cremation practices in early medieval cemeteries in France have for a long time been considered as an hangover from the past, the remains of Gallo-Roman period graves, or else evidence of contacts with Germanic groups and their 'barbaric' burial practices. However, recent archaeological discoveries have led French archaeologists to question the practice and its rarity. The increase of ^{14}C dating on burnt bones showed that some Gallo-Roman cremation burials were actually early medieval cremation burials, showing persistence of the practice into the Early Middle Ages. Merovingian and Carolingian-period cremations are, however, not identical and future research will certainly bring valuable insights regarding their specificities.

Cremation deposit, Merovingian period, Carolingian period, pagan practices, French archaeology, France.

Introduction

Howard Williams: Could you introduce yourself and your work relating to early medieval cremation burials?

Vanessa Brunet: I have been an archaeothanatologist for seventeen years, and currently working for Inrap, an Institute that conducts rescue archaeological excavations threatened by construction projects in France. I have been trained in the excavation and study of cremations; my interest in early medieval cremation practices started in 2012. During a field operation, the discovery of a secondary cremation deposit dated to the second half of the ninth or the beginning of the tenth century CE led me to question the presumed absence of this type of burial or assertions as to its rarity in French archaeological publications. In association with colleagues, we have been investigating this unexpected find since 2020, collaborating with archaeologists, historians and various scholars to get a sense of the practice across the country. Several workshops, seminars and a national conference were organised to disseminate our research and interrogate the French scientific community regarding this topic.



Figure 10.1: Cross-section of storage pit 2929 at La Chapelle-Saint-Mesmin (Loiret, France). The Carolingian cremation is located on the bottom of the structure (black sediment) (Photograph by Eveha 2015)

Erwan Nivez: I have been an osteoarchaeologist for eleven years. I mainly work in the field of rescue archaeology (Inrap), but I also contribute to research projects related to mortuary issues. I have been trained in human osteology, with a specialisation in cremation practices. It is through my participation in a publication on graves with burnt skeletons from the seventh–eighth centuries CE that I began to be interested in burnt human bones in early medieval contexts. Discussions raised by this topic highlighted the diversity of gestures associated with the practice and showed me that, in fact, early medieval cremated human bones are more frequent than the literature had hitherto indicated. A lot of examples are actually not published, which makes research on the topic extremely complicated.

New evidence for cremation

Femke Lippok: Which site in your research area featuring cremation burials deserves more attention, and why? If you could send samples for a free ^{14}C date, which site/graves would you spend it on?

VB: The Carolingian site of La Chapelle-Saint-Mesmin (Loiret, Centre-Val de Loire) particularly deserves attention with the discovery in a grain-storage pit of a secondary cremation deposit (Figure 10.1) associated with unburnt objects with clear Scandinavian parallels. It is not so much the type of artefacts found, as there is nothing to suggest that they are non-local, as their association that makes this cremation unusual in France. The grave assemblage at La Chapelle-Saint-Mesmin shows in fact similarities with a grave from Birka, Sweden. In both cases we have a ‘melon’ bead, a similar type of key, a currier’s knife, a second knife

and various dress accessories, which, again, constitute a combination of artefacts that is truly uncommon for a Carolingian cremation and, more broadly, for graves from this period (Berthon and Brunet 2022). The burial deposit has been dated to the ninth century CE based on the typology of the ceramic and the artefacts as well as ^{14}C carried on human and animal bones, and charcoal. Strontium stable isotope analysis on the remains of the cremated individual is planned but not yet implemented; it will be analysed in order to compare the subject with the ‘local’ individuals buried in the churchyard located 1.5 km away and dated to the same period.

Synthesising the data for cremation

HW: You are working on the first synthesis of early medieval cremation graves for northern France. Why do you think these graves have been overlooked for so long?

VB: There are actually several reasons that can explain this situation. For a long time, archaeologists and historians have considered that the cremation practice belonged to the Gallo-Roman period and could only have existed beyond this period in a marginal way and in areas of contact with Saxon, Frisian and other Germanic groups. Forty years ago, burnt human remains were little or not studied, mainly because they were considered unfit for osteological assessment and, thus, not very promising material in terms of data. The evolution of the archaeo-anthropological discipline over the last thirty years has clearly challenged this assumption. For the past twenty years, burnt and unburnt human remains have been approached similarly by French biological anthropologists, and it is common today to call on them when burnt bones (human or animal) are found during excavations. ^{14}C dating is also more common on cremation remains for the past ten years, and the method no longer involves sacrificing the entire deposit. The lower cost of this type of analysis also plays a significant role. Interest in cremation burials is now present in France, and there is no hesitation to proceed to a ^{14}C dating in case of doubt on a chronological attribution. As a result, some ancient cremation burials have been reassigned to the early medieval period, and hence increasing number of cremation graves dating from the Early Middle Ages (a similar situation is identified in Belgium, see Annaert, this volume).

Context should also be taken into consideration to explain the general neglect of these graves. When evidence of a cremation is found in an inhumation burial, it usually receives little explanation in the site report and is regarded as too marginal or too atypical for the period.

EN: A further dimension of context is that no large cremation cemeteries are known for the Merovingian

and Carolingian periods in France, and so we are focusing upon small numbers of burials within predominantly inhumation cemeteries: this limits the scope of the examples found and, to date, there has been no synthesis of these examples. Indeed, it is time to go beyond the simple list of isolated instances to identify cremation as an infrequent but still-significant minority rite in early medieval mortuary practices in the region.

Challenges for investigations

HW: What problems did you encounter when investigating early medieval cremation burials?

VB: The survey is certainly one of the most significant problems. Old discoveries and publications only mention the presence of 'cremations' without giving further details. This is the pitfall of old sources.

EN: More recent sources barely mention this type of remains. National databases exist in France, such as Dolia, used by Inrap, and Patriarche, used by the Regional Archaeological Services which depend on the French State. However, it is impossible to carry out a 'cremation/early medieval' cross-query. You have to go through each online site report (when they are accessible!). It is then a long and tedious process, which can be even more difficult for non-French speakers or researchers not based in France (for a similar discussion, see also Gardela, this volume on Norway).

More sensitively, part of the archaeological community is not convinced of the reality of the cremation practice in the Early Middle Ages at all, with sometimes sceptical questions being returned from some state institutions.

The potential for investigating cremation

FL: What can we gain from studying these cremation graves? What do they add to the current understanding of early medieval burial rites in your region?

VB: The study of cremation graves is interesting for several reasons. We hope to quantify the number of cremation graves and identify possible concentrations; understand the nature of the population concerned (children, women, men) and conduct stable isotopes analysis to answer questions about the mobility of people and goods. Through these strands of enquiry, we hope to better understand the continuation of so-called 'pagan' funerary rites in the Frankish kingdom, the acculturation phenomena between Gallo-Roman and Frankish people, identify possible trading posts in the Frankish kingdom and explore their contacts with the East and North (e.g. Scandinavia).

Past interpretations

HW: What is the generally accepted explanation for the occurrence of cremations in your research area? What's the background of this interpretation? And what's your view on those theories?

VB: The presence of cremation burials is generally accepted in areas known for their contacts and exchanges with the Frisians and the Saxons (see Annaert and Knol, both this volume). I think this is a quite plausible interpretation considering the geographical and presumably cultural proximity of these populations. We know that border areas were permeable at that time and that this did not only concern individuals and goods, but also practices, including belief and burial practices. Turning to historians, the cremation practice was still carried out during the Carolingian period, as shown by its condemnation by Charlemagne in 785 in his Saxon Capitulary. However, it is important to remember that this document was mainly used as a political way to subdue the Saxons rather than actual repression of the practice. If the practice was so common during the Carolingian period, it should be more visible archaeologically, which is not really the case. The limited number of findings in France is probably multifactorial. The cremation graves may have disappeared over time because they were located outside of the spaces traditionally devoted to the dead. Another possibility is the deliberate erasure of these graves as a result of Christianisation, as it seems to have been the case in Frisia and Flanders (see Annaert and Knol, both this volume), although in the case of France, it seems more accurate to talk of an influence rather than an actual initiating role of Christianisation. The lack of interest in these structures, which are regularly considered far older (often misattributed to the Gallo-Roman period), as well as the lack of systematic ¹⁴C dating, also partly explain this situation.

Fire rituals

FL: Salin (1952) already wrote about fire-related practices in and around graves in Northern France; *les feux rituels*, when inhumation grave-pits are burnt before the body is placed inside. Do these rituals occur on sites where cremation occurs? Are they in any way related, in your opinion?

EN: Salin (1952: 202–212) and Young (1977: 30–36) mentioned fires being lit in Merovingian graves, either before or after the body or the container was buried. It usually concerns old and poorly described cases, which makes current research difficult. For Salin, the higher number of examples recorded in eastern France was indicative of a Germanic influence. For Young, on the contrary, the geographical distribution of the sites is more diffuse,

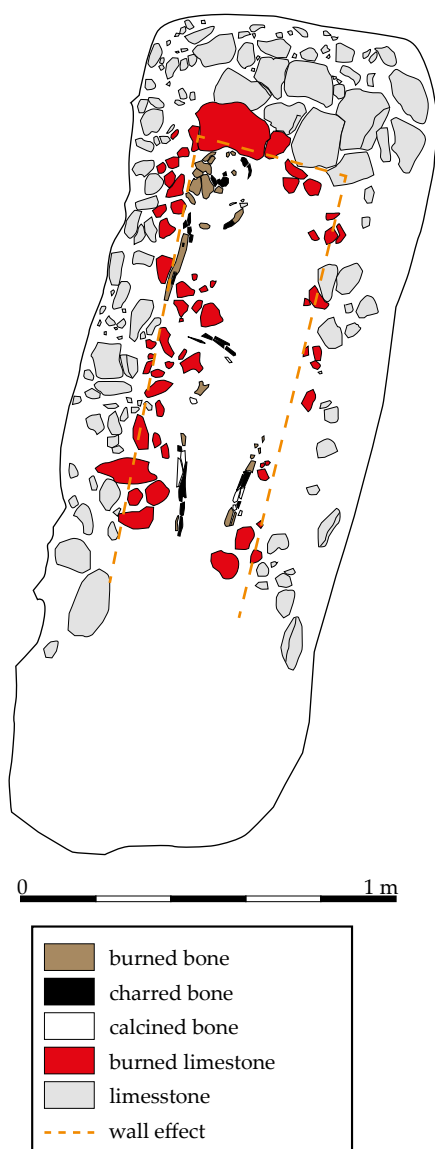


Figure 10.2: Illustration of an inhumation in a wooden container at Chaniers (Charente-Maritime, France). The skeleton shows evidence of cremation (Photograph by Inrap 2022, V. Sanglar, B. Kirschenbilder)

and instead of looking for a Germanic influence, the persistence of practices prior to the Roman period should be considered. These *feux rituels* mentioned in the archaeological literature are in fact absent from medieval texts, and thus difficult to understand – they could indicate a symbolic or practical purification of the grave? It is also possible that actual cremations have been misinterpreted.

Occasionally, the cremation rite could have been chosen for sanitary purposes, in epidemic contexts, for instance, and notably the Justinian plague. Such an interpretation has been considered at Chaniers (Kirschenbilder *et al.* forthcoming). Based on the writings of Gregory of Tours, the Justinian plague was limited to the southern half of France, which does not correspond to the area where the majority of Merovingian and Carolingian cremation burials were found (Latouche 1979. Grégoire de Tours: *Histoire des Francs*, book IV). However, recent aDNA analyses of skeletal remains from Edix Hill cemetery in England have shown that the epidemic spread over a wider geographical area than previously assumed (Keller *et al.* 2019). In any case, the plague argument as an explanation for the cremation rite would only apply to some specific cases.

To my knowledge, there are no examples of *feux rituels* on the sites where cremation burials have been identified. Young (1977: 30–36) showed that Salin actually mixed two phenomena: deposits of cremains or charcoal in graves and cases of fire being lit in graves before or after the body or the container was placed in the pit. There are some examples of inhumations with bodies partially burnt (which tends to show that the fire was lit after the placement of the container inside the pit) (Figure 10.2), but the practice concerned only a few bones or skeletal elements in a secondary position (Hernandez 2014: 131–210). It is doubtful that the primary objective was the systematic cremation of the bodies. There are a few cases where the cremation of the flesh seems to have been the main intention though, such as at Chaniers and Bussy-Saint-Georges sites.

Key data: Northern France

Where do cremations occur in your research area?

VB: In the current state of the research, Merovingian cremations are found in the northern half of France, from the north of the Loire River to the Belgian border. They show cultural influences and exchanges between the Frankish kingdom and Germanic groups during that period. The type of urn used and the small objects associated with the cremations support the reality of these contacts and influences (Verslype 2008: 340). Regarding the Carolingian cremations, cases have so far only been reported in the regions Île-de-France and Centre.

In what quantities do cremations occur in your research area?

VB: A dozen Merovingian sites with contemporaneous cremations are known so far (Barrou, Bulles, Giberville, Hordain, Houplin, Neuville-sur-Escout, Novion-en-Ponthieu, Prény, Quiéry-la-Motte, Tournai-Saint-Brice, Vireux-Molhain et Vron). There are not many, but that's similar to observations made in Belgium or southern Germany (see Annaert and Masanz, both this volume). For the Carolingian period, cases are much less numerous, with only six to seven examples on the French territory (Agris, Bonneuil-en-France, Bussy-Saint-Georges, Chaniers, La Chapelle-Saint-Mesmin, Lesquin, Villiers-le-Bel).

In what forms are cremations deposited in your research area? Are there any indications of pyres? (for example, only the bones without charcoal, a mix of charcoal and bones, pyre graves etc.)

VB: Merovingian cremations mainly consisted of cremation remains – bones, charcoal, burnt objects – placed in a circular pit of 20 to 30cm in diameter. The structure could be covered by a burial mound but was not always (for similar examples, see Knol, this volume). We have a good example of a cremation burial covered by a mound at Hordain. There, grave 115 was surrounded by a circular ditch of almost 4.50m in diameter (Demolon 2006: 35). No later graves overlapped or destroyed the cremation structure. It is the association between the ditch and the circular space not being reused at a later point that led to the conclusion that the burial was covered by a mound. In fact, this type of funerary structure is very similar for the period to what can be observed with inhumation graves.

EN: Carolingian cremations were quite diverse. Sometimes they are secondary cremation deposits, similar in this sense to Gallo-Roman burial practices. On other occasions, the deceased were simply cremated *in situ* within the grave pits. Locations were also varied with cremation structures found in cemeteries, but also in domestic contexts or in reused grain-storage pits.

So far, no indications of pyres were found for Merovingian and Carolingian cremations.

What types of containers are associated with cremations? (for example, urns, wooden containers, leather pouches?)

VB: No Merovingian cremations discovered so far have shown evidence of containers. And only one Carolingian cremation produced a complete ceramic vessel associated with various objects from the domestic sphere.

When objects occur with cremations, what type of objects are they? (do they tend to be burnt or unburnt?)

VB: Cremations found in the Merovingian cemetery of Bulles (Oise, Hauts-de-France) had, in addition to the bones and charcoal, melted metal objects (Legoux 1988). The one at Barrou had burnt faunal remains, fragments of melted glass and pieces of metal altered by fire (Jouet 2023).

The Carolingian example from La Chapelle-Saint-Mesmin (Loiret, Centre-Val de Loire) was associated with animal remains, mainly burnt, keys, buckle elements, a glass bead, a knife, a smoother, and two undetermined iron rods. All these objects were both complete and unburnt (Berthon and Brunet 2022). This is an especially interesting grave as at the time the furnished inhumation rite was no longer really part of the usual burial practice and was about to cease. At Bonneuil-en-France (Val-d'Oise, Île-de-France), the cremation grave contained shards of an eighth-ninth century CE painted and polished jar, an iron pint, a fragment of a knife blade and an unburnt canine bone (Lebrun *et al.* 2023).

Are there funerary monuments or other structures surrounding cremations in your research area?

VB: Funerary monuments or similar structures have only been found in association with Merovingian cremations (burial mounds), but not with Carolingian cremations.

Is there any noteworthy spatial patterning of cremation burials on the sites they occur on?

EN: Early medieval cremation burials do not particularly stand out in the landscape or from other types of burial structures.

What trends can be observed regarding the occurrence of cremation burials throughout time in your research area?

VB: The discovery of early medieval cremation burials is very rare in France. However, this situation is expected to change in the near future thanks to the gradual awareness of the archaeological community for the practice. Discussions and presentations of case-studies at conferences and workshops

have proved to be a good way of increasing the number of cases. ¹⁴C dating, for instance, is now regularly carried out on cremation remains considered to be ancient, and as a result, we found out that some of them are in fact Merovingian. An example of this is the cremation grave from Barrou (Indre-et-Loire, Centre) (Jouet 2023).

Where osteological data is available, is there any apparent selection of deceased according to their sex or age?

VB: The few reliable data that we have (based on current osteological methods) show that the deceased were predominantly immature individuals. A reassessment of Merovingian cremations previously found still needs to be carried out due to the lack of interest in the study of burnt human bones forty years ago.

What relationship existed between inhumation burials and cremation burials in your research area? Do they occur on the same site or even in the same grave context?

VB: There is no evidence of a clear desire to separate cremation burials from inhumation burials during the Merovingian period. Both types of graves are found next to each other.

During the Carolingian period, cremation burials were mostly on the fringes of the churchyards, even sometimes outside, as it is at Bonneuil-en-France (Val-d'Oise, Île-de-France) et La Chapelle-Saint-Mesmin (Loiret, Centre-Val de Loire) with the reuse of grain-storage pits as cremation places. However, with these off-cemetery cases, we are still on the same site, on the same territory in terms of occupation, with cremation burials settled in well-identified and delimited Carolingian villages.

EN: A nuance here, though, with some cremation graves found inside churchyards, such as graves 3 and 13 at Chaniers (Charente-Maritime, Nouvelle-Aquitaine) (Moizan *et al.* 2009). These graves are 'atypical' in the sense that they differ from the standard burial practice in Chaniers, which is primarily inhumation. When I say 'atypical' I refer here to a specific concept defined by Cécile Treffort (2004) and that could be compared to the English 'deviant burial'. The funerary norm according to the early medieval texts and old excavations of large field cemeteries with no cremations identified, and the funerary norm(s) according to what archaeology reveals are not quite similar, and cremation burials are a good example. Treffort rightly notes that this 'atypical' aspect of the cremation practice may have been a reality in the Merovingian period, but may also be the result of our own view of the practice and the historiography of archaeology in France.

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The Bioarchaeology of Early Medieval Cremation Practices in England

Kirsty Squires

Cremation was a dominant mortuary rite in England from the fifth to early seventh centuries CE. A notable characteristic of cremation practicing communities is the large cemeteries where the living interred the cremated remains of the dead, alongside grave- and pyre-goods, and animal offerings in pottery cinerary urns. Yet despite the wealth of information that can be obtained from material culture and human burnt bone, this funerary rite has historically been largely ignored in favour of the contemporary inhumation rite. Where cremation is studied, there is an overreliance on the rich data from the Spong Hill (Norfolk) cemetery. As a result, our understanding of social identity is skewed towards inhumation practicing groups and those that buried the dead at the aforementioned site. However, in recent years there has been a gradual shift towards the study of other sites and the application of analytical techniques to better understand social identity and the demographic makeup of these groups, and the cremation process itself. It is clear that we should not treat cremation as the poorer relative of inhumation, given the largely untapped potential of cremated human remains and associated funerary assemblages.

Bioarchaeology, human remains, cremated bone, cremation process, social identity, early medieval.

Introduction

Femke Lippok: Could you introduce yourself and your work relating to early medieval cremation burials?

Kirsty Squires: My name is Dr Kirsty Squires; I am currently Associate Professor of Bioarchaeology. I started my journey into cremation studies when I was enrolled on the MSc in Human Osteology and Funerary Archaeology course at the University of Sheffield. For my dissertation, I decided to carry out a project focusing on the early medieval cemetery at Elsham (North Lincolnshire). I analysed 300 burials, as I hoped to gain a more comprehensive insight into the site's burial population. The cemetery hadn't been studied since it had been excavated in the mid-1970s, bar Mary Harman's (n.d.) initial assessment of the human remains. I was interested in looking at additional associations in terms of demographic patterns with grave-goods and pyre-goods as well as the variation in the cinerary urns. I became particularly interested in cremation after that and I pursued this further during my doctoral research (Squires 2011). This allowed me to investigate both

the Elsham and Cleatham (North Lincolnshire) cemeteries in their entirety, analysing all burials and all individuals. In total, 1,545 individuals were analysed. I was looking for associations between demographic characteristics, cinerary urns, animal offerings, grave- and pyre-goods, and spatial organisation. I was especially interested in pyre technology: here, I used histomorphology, as well as FTIR (Fourier-Transform Infrared) Spectroscopy, which allowed me to answer questions about the cremation process itself (e.g. see Squires *et al.* 2011). Throughout the early stages of my career, my primary research focus was early medieval cremation practices, though this is not so much the case anymore. I'm still carrying out smaller research projects in this area, especially around pyre technology, the information we can extract from burnt human remains, as well as the social identity of children from this period.

Interpreting early medieval cremation practices

FL: Which site in your research area featuring cremation burials deserves more attention, and why?

KS: I think Elsham and Cleatham definitely need more attention. Even now, where we are seeing greater focus on early medieval funerary rites and cremation more broadly, both Elsham and Cleatham (and even smaller early medieval cremation cemeteries) are still neglected, despite the wealth of information we now have about the dead and the cremation rite. Publications that have been released over the past few years where cremation is addressed continue to concentrate on Spong Hill (e.g. Sayer 2020). This situation persists in limiting our understanding of the cremation rite and the identity of those that practised it during this period in parts of England. I do think we need to be promoting these other sites and encouraging researchers to study them further. A good example is research currently being undertaken by Tessi Löffelmann at Durham University/Vrije Universiteit Brussel, who is conducting isotope analysis on a sample of skeletal remains from Cleatham (e.g. Löffelmann 2023 and this volume) as part of a larger project that explores mobility and funerary rites in the medieval period. So, we are slowly starting to see more work being conducted on skeletal assemblages other than Spong Hill, but there is still a way to go.

Howard Williams: It's the whole site-type curse, it's a blessing that Spong Hill has been so extensively excavated and analysed of course (McKinley 1994; Hills and Lucy 2013), but it also has a stranglehold on our interpretations and broader research agenda (see also Harland this volume).

KS: Definitely, whilst individual site studies are very valuable, I do think we need to move away from this approach and look at the bigger picture. The focus on

Spong Hill creates a tunnel vision, perpetuating the assumption that if it has happened at Spong Hill, it must have taken place everywhere, and that's not the case. This is evident from biocultural associations observed at Spong Hill compared with those at Sancton I (East Riding of Yorkshire), Elsham, and Cleatham (Squires 2013).

FL: In that way, Spong Hill, unfortunately, can dominate perceptions of what cremation burials in the whole of southern and eastern England are like at this time.

HW: What's your take on why cremation cemeteries are comparatively larger than contemporaneous inhumation burial sites?

KS: I think the cremation cemeteries were being used by multiple settlements as opposed to a single settlement (Squires 2012). Here, Elsham and Cleatham are very interesting as they are so large, and they are only about 12 miles apart: they were clearly accommodating large numbers and populations from multiple settlement sites. Based on McKinley's (1994: 69–71) work on the Spong Hill cemetery, Leahy (2007: 32) suggests that such cemeteries were likely used over a 150–200-year period. Therefore, if Elsham and Cleatham were used for 150 years, three to four burials at Elsham and six to seven interments at Cleatham would be taking place each year on average (Squires 2012). This is quite a lot for a single settlement, and so we estimate there are multiple settlements served by these cemeteries. I'm not sure of the reason for that, certainly their position in the landscape played a role but I think there may have been other significances to the choice and importance of these locations (see also Williams 2002; Perry, this volume).

FL: You have pointed out interesting patterns of gender and age differentiation between cremation and inhumation burials. Could you elaborate and what is your interpretation of these patterns?

KS: What I find interesting about cremation is the lack of dichotomous gender categories, which is in contrast to the inhumation rite. In the cremation rite, the display of gender is more muted in the burial context. Instead, age and life cycle appear to be more important, or at least it's more evident, when we look at funerary offerings and cinerary urns. For example, juveniles are buried in smaller pots (Squires 2013; also see Perry, this volume). Of course, they produce less bone than adults, but there appear to be clear gradations in terms of the increasing height of cinerary urns assigned to individuals at different life stages (Squires 2013; Squires 2014; Figure 11.1). We also see that children were less likely to have been interred with animal offerings than their older counterparts, and were afforded a more limited range of grave-goods/pyre-

goods. Furthermore, where infants and children were provided these items, they are more similar to the female types of grave provisions (Squires 2014). Obviously, there is variability, but these young individuals were most typically found with beads, rings, combs, and spindle whorls: objects typically associated with females and domestic contexts (Crawford 2008; Squires 2019).

I think objects afforded to the dead were carefully curated and reflected their social identity, their role within society, and how much they contributed to their household or society more broadly. For example, infants and young children have closer ties with the home as they are more likely to have spent much of their time within the domestic sphere as opposed to going out and participating in agricultural activities or other more physically demanding tasks (Squires 2014; Squires 2019). In my analysis, these social roles and the perception of the youngest members of society would have influenced the funerary offerings and how these individuals were cremated.

As previously mentioned, gender-related relationships between skeletal remains and associated funerary assemblages tend to be more muted in the cremation rite. With regards to females, their assemblages were more akin to what we are used to seeing in inhumations. For example, jewellery: rings, brooches, beads, and objects related to female-oriented domestic tasks, such as spindle whorls. In terms of male grave assemblages, things aren't as clear cut; for instance, weapons and knives aren't as common as we see in the inhumation rite. At some sites, sets of miniature toilet sets are associated with males but at other sites they are not (Squires 2013). At Cleatham, 67% of individuals found with a miniature toilet set were identified as males, whereas similar frequencies were recorded as female from Elsham. Now, the numbers are very small, and this is one of the issues of looking at biocultural associations amongst cremation practicing groups. Specialists must be able to identify these distorted pyre-goods in the first instance and, secondly, osteologists need to be able to determine the sex of the deceased individual, which can be very difficult because the remains are fragmentary and sexually dimorphic characteristics may not survive. This is a real challenge, and we must be cautious when interpreting the associations between demographic traits and grave- and pyre-goods.

FL: In one of your papers, you discuss a special relationship between animal offerings and certain demographics, could you elaborate?

KS: I find animal offerings really interesting as they seem to have played an important role in the cremation rite (see also Croix, this volume). At several cremation cemeteries, accessory vessels containing cremated horse bones have been recorded (Squires 2011). The burning patterns on

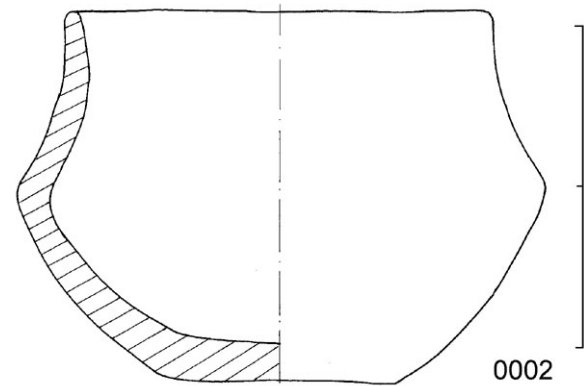


Figure 11.1: Urn 2 from Cleatham (North Lincolnshire) held the cremated remains of an infant (drawing courtesy of Kevin Leahy)

faunal remains are, in itself, intriguing as they were less intensely burned than the associated human remains. It would appear that the duration of cremation of the human and associated animal offerings was the same but given the large size of some animals and/or their position on the funerary pyre, the bones were not given the opportunity to undergo complete calcination (Squires 2015: 164). Unfortunately, this has not been studied in great detail to date, but is an area I intend to investigate over the coming years. As previously mentioned, infants and children were less likely to be offered animals at the funeral. Similar to the muted gender associations observed when examining pyre- and grave-goods, there wasn't really any distinction in terms of the frequency of animal remains between males and females at Elsham, Cleatham and, indeed, other contemporary cremation cemeteries (Squires 2013). Where species could be identified (i.e. by me, as the faunal remains are awaiting a comprehensive zooarchaeological analysis), there were no clear links between the biological attributes of the dead and species offered. Yet, despite this, there are clearly trends over time. In total, 24% of early medieval cremation deposits that I looked at in England contained animal offerings (Squires 2016). I compared this with cremation cemeteries on the Continent. In Roman Germany, 74% of cremations contained animal offerings, though this figure is drastically reduced at Migration Period sites (7%) (Squires 2016). It therefore seems that in the early medieval period, cremation practising groups were holding on to this older tradition of cremating animals with the dead. This is of particular interest to me as it shows how beliefs, social structure, and identity evolved over time and this is reflected in the mortuary rites of past populations.

HW: Because you have determined that there is less of a gender-emphasis in the cremations, could that be in part due to the contrasting preservation of the objects? As we

gender graves according to the objects, and then when less objects are preserved, that could automatically lead to less of a distinction between burials?

KS: Certainly, the poor preservation of objects further compounds a complete understanding of how social identity was expressed in death during this period. In many cases, it is difficult to establish the sex of the dead for the reasons outlined earlier. Due to the shrinkage of bone during the cremation process, poor preservation, and the lack of surviving sexually dimorphic traits, individuals are undoubtedly misidentified as females (McKinley 1994: 68–69; Squires 2012: 336). This is a problem in itself. We then have to consider the preservation of the objects themselves, whether they were put on the pyre (and where they were, they are often damaged) and the remnants of some objects may not have been collected and interred by mourners. This highlights that there are many limitations and challenges when exploring the gender of individuals that belonged to cremation practicing households. At present, this ultimately means that we are only able to get a snapshot into gender identity of those offered the cremation rite.

The decline and end of cremation

HW: What is your take on social stratification as an explanation for the shift to inhumation burials in the sixth and seventh centuries (i.e. the decline and end of cremation in early Anglo-Saxon England)?

KS: This is something that can be observed in the funerary record and, in part, this relates to a couple of points I mentioned earlier about gender division being more muted in cremation burials compared to inhumations, and the burial of cremation practicing individuals in household plots. The latter, in particular, points to household identities with a lack of internal social divisions. In contrast, strongly gendered grave provisions and increasing amounts of wealth invested in the dress and personal effects offered at the funeral tell a different story. Here, I think inhumation practicing groups were showing not only their identity at the funeral, but their (and possibly their household's) social standing in the local area, and possibly shifting attitudes in ideological beliefs and kin identities (Ravn 2003; Squires 2013). This aligns with the notion that the reuse of monuments, particularly moving into the seventh century, may have been instigated by elites as a means of visually displaying their power and control, as well as connections with their ancestors (Hills 1997; Stoodley 1999; Härke 2001). Funerary rites may thus have been a way of reinforcing social stratification and conveying a multitude of social, ideological, and political messages to the living; and the living may have used these to reinforce their social standing within the local and regional areas through these rites.

FL: You are suggesting that inhumation burials would be seen as a better way to display status?

KS: Yes, I think this was the case towards the end of the sixth century and the beginning of the early seventh century. However, that is not to say that there weren't elaborate cremations; we know that there are examples of cremated horses and large numbers of cremation burials containing animal offerings. This in itself would have been a large investment in terms of resources (Squires 2013). It could be said that inhumation was a different way of conveying social and political messages, though the amount of investment placed in them is much clearer to archaeologists as they have not sustained damage caused during the cremation process. Additionally, the change in funerary rites and emphasis on displaying social standing could also have been linked to changing beliefs and a move away from an older ideology.

FL: Developing on this point, what is your take on using Christianisation to explain the disappearance of cremation burials towards the end of the Early Middle Ages?

KS: I think this is ultimately linked to the fragmentation and transformation of the body, which Howard has written about extensively (e.g. Williams 2003; Williams 2005). For example, he argues that the use of objects, such as combs and toiletries, was important in creating a new body and social identity whereas the inhumation practicing groups were burying their dead in an idealised, complete state (Williams 2005). While cremation alters the state of the body, Christian beliefs during the Middle Ages encouraged the conception of corporeal integrity which was necessary for Resurrection. I therefore think that Christianity was one of the main underlying reasons why cremation burials disappeared in the seventh century. However, the switch from cremation to inhumation wasn't immediate; we can see this at some of the higher status burial sites, such as the presence of both cremation and inhumation graves at Sutton Hoo (Suffolk) (Carver 2005) and the 'princely' chambered inhumation burial at Prittlewell (Essex) (Blackmore *et al.* 2019) where there was an interplay of Christian influences and pre-existing ideological beliefs and iconography (Sayer 2013). Again, this appears to be linked to social stratification and social standing of the dead more than personal faith.

FL: Recent research has focused on the long-durée perspective of co-occurring inhumation and cremation graves. The Early Middle Ages are no exception in the sense that co-occurrence of these rites is frequent. How do you think this perspective changes our understanding of early medieval cremations and the burial ritual at large?

KS: I think that the co-occurrence of inhumation and cremation burials at the same site can provide an insight into social relationships and kin affiliations. Interestingly, at Cleatham inhumation and cremation were both practised throughout the fifth and sixth centuries, though only inhumation continued into the latter half of the seventh century (Leahy 2007). Inhumation burials were found throughout the cemetery amongst the cremated bone deposits. This ties into the notion that individuals were buried in household plots, that not only comprised of immediate family members but those that had developed artificial kin affiliations, such as affiliates, wet nurses, fosterers, and those responsible for childcare (Squires 2012; Squires 2019). Extended kin members may have held differential beliefs and come from a household with an alternative social structure. Following death, they are likely to have been afforded funerary rites in line with their own social and cultural customs but interred in household plots with their kin group. I think increased awareness of co-occurring cremation and inhumation rites has highlighted that groups, and individuals, practicing cremation or inhumation did not live in bubbles nor were they segregated from those with differing beliefs or mortuary rites. The development of methodologies to further understand these relationships will be addressed below.

HW: Would you say that the (cremation) burial repertoires in North Lincolnshire are regionally distinct? How do they compare to surrounding regions?

KS: From what I have seen, in terms of the actual cremation process, it does seem to be part of a broader phenomenon, with some degree of variability. This is also evident through an examination of burning patterns and intensity exhibited on bones, fragmentation of human remains, and cremated bone deposit weight. All individuals buried at Elsham and Cleatham received an adequate cremation, in that there was no evidence of a failed cremation, though there was variability in terms of the intensity of cremation between human bone deposits (Squires 2015; Carroll and Squires 2020a). This could be attributed to the amount of investment placed in a cremation, for example the amount of resources, labour, and time invested in a funeral. For instance, individuals, perhaps of a lower social standing, may have received a smaller funerary pyre as this required less fuel and labour. These cremations may have been shorter and, consequently, the remains exhibit less intense burning patterns than, say, individuals cremated on a larger pyre for a longer period of time (Squires 2015). On a similar line, if the pyre of a person that was deemed to be of lower social standing was extinguished and the bones were ‘adequately’ cremated, but not calcined, mourners may not have invested in the time

and labour required to ensure bones were calcined. This notion can be extended to the collection and interment of remains, when we look at the quantity of bone buried in urns, though there are many factors at play here, for example if mourners retained fragments of burnt bone, if bones were distributed between mourners, if bones were not collected from the pyre site, or if some cremated bone fragments were interred or scattered elsewhere (Squires 2015). There are some slight differences in terms of the artefacts that are buried with individuals, which could be explained through different local identities. One of the main challenges we face when drawing conclusions around regional variability, particularly concerning pyre-goods, is the small numbers of identifiable artefacts; this is something we must be mindful of when studying cremation burials. An examination of burning intensity and heat-induced changes to bone can further our understanding of the cremation process and social identity. It is clear that more work is required to compare and contrast variability in cremation technology within and between cemeteries.

FL: What’s the role of historical sources in the interpretation of cremation burials?

KS: It’s quite difficult to use historical sources when interpreting cremations from early medieval contexts as there are no contemporaneous sources. In my own research, I’ve had to refer to historical sources from different chronological periods and different geographical areas. Whilst these sources can potentially provide a glimpse into the cremation process itself and some of the challenges faced by these cremation practicing communities in England, we can’t draw a direct comparison due to social and cultural differences between disparate societies (Squires 2019). However, textual sources can be useful as they highlight some of the considerations that populations had to make when cremating bodies. For example, in Tacitus *Germania*, written around 98 CE, the author outlines the process of selecting different types of wood for the cremation pyre (Birley 1999). Indeed, this could potentially be explored further in the present context through analysis of charcoal recovered from early medieval cremation deposits. So, it sparks ideas in terms of future avenues of research. Overall, I think there is a place for historical sources when studying early medieval cremation, but we do have to use them with caution and cannot draw direct links between two disparate societies. The same can be said for ethnographic sources, particularly when we focus on the cremation process, pyre construction, and comparison of burning patterns on the body when an open-air pyre is used versus cremation in a crematorium which allows for controlled burning (McKinley 1997; Williams 2016; Squires 2017).

Methodological advances

HW: What methodological advances do you see influencing the study of early medieval cremations in the foreseeable future?

KS: It has been incredibly exciting to see the methodological advances over the past ten years. In particular, the ability to apply isotope analysis to archaeological cremated bone has further demonstrated that analytical methods *can* be employed in cremation studies; these developments are thanks in part to the research carried out by Lise Harvig (Harvig *et al.* 2014), and Christophe Snoeck and the CRUMBEL team in Belgium (Snoeck *et al.* 2018; Snoeck *et al.* 2019). I think these developments will help us understand more about kin-associations, the movement of populations, and the identity of these cremation practicing groups. Furthermore, I think it is only a matter of time before we see studies that successfully extract aDNA from burnt bones. Research that focuses on burning intensity is integral here because it's difficult to extract aDNA samples from bone that has been subjected to high intensity burning. However, knowledge of burning intensity and the use of techniques, such as histomorphometry and FTIR spectroscopy, can be used to target samples of less intensely burnt bone, which is more likely to be useful in the extraction of genetic material.

The successful application of aDNA analysis in cremation studies would also open up new research avenues. For example, sex estimation of individuals from cremation cemeteries (which at present is scant due to the reasons outlined earlier) would lead to a better understanding of biocultural associations and identities of these groups (Squires 2011).

In terms of my own research, I employ histomorphology, which involves cutting thin sections of bone and examining the bone microstructure as a means of establishing burning intensity. I have also used FTIR Spectroscopy with colleagues at Teesside University for the same purpose (Squires *et al.* 2011). The resultant data from these forms of analysis can be used to learn about the position of the body on the pyre and burning intensity more broadly. I have published a couple of papers with Emily Carroll, whereby we employed histomorphology and traditional colour (of bone) analysis to compare the cremation process during the Roman and early medieval periods (Carroll and Squires 2020a). It is interesting to highlight that there was clearly a difference between the samples from the two chronological periods examined. Roman-period communities were achieving much higher temperatures, potentially due to the use of professional cremators (or *ustores*) who were responsible for cremating the dead. The use of analytical techniques to explore variability in cremation conditions through time has also been explored by Stamataki *et al.* (2021), though

the focus here was cremation during the Metal Ages in Belgium. It is essential that we start making use of these methods due to the wealth of information we can obtain from the resultant data. In the past, they have often not been applied because of the time and effort required to prepare the samples. Nonetheless, the advantages of this methodology are evident. Furthermore, Emily, as part of her doctoral research, has developed a faster and more standardised technique to prepare samples, which will hopefully encourage other bioarchaeologists to adopt histomorphometry in their own research (Carroll and Squires 2020b).

FL: How do you see advancements in isotopic study changing the way we look at (early medieval) cremations? What questions might this methodological advancement help us answer?

KS: The only thing I would add is that after so many years of research on artefacts from cremation cemeteries, it is nice to see more bioarchaeological and biomolecular work being carried out on cremated human remains. Ultimately, this will offer a more accurate insight into the lives and deaths of individuals that belonged to cremation practicing groups, and I'm therefore very much looking forward to seeing what new information we will learn about early medieval cremation practicing communities over the next few years.

FL: What's the most efficient way of burning a body?

KS: On an open pyre, potentially supine and extended would be best, because of the concentrations of fat in the abdomen. If a body is positioned atop a funerary pyre, the direct heat would have resulted in faster cremation, provided there were good oxidising conditions (e.g. through the use of under pyre scoops). In contrast, the body in a crouched position would have taken a little longer to cremate, because the body would have been flexed, resulting in tissue shielding; this, in turn, would have taken longer for the intense heat to reach the concentration of fat in the abdominal area.

HW: I remember Jackie McKinley saying there is not much evidence for variation in body position. But could we potentially see the difference between prone and crouched positions on the pyre? What would we be looking at?

KS: That is correct, I have yet to observe evidence of this from early medieval cremated bone deposits. To identify different positions on the pyre, macroscopic colour changes (alongside histomorphometry and FTIR spectroscopy, e.g. Squires *et al.* 2011) can be examined to gauge burning intensity. Variable burning intensity will show

which bone surface was exposed to direct, intense heat. For example, if the anterior surface of a femur fragment was white and fully calcined, we could conclude that this bone surface was directly exposed to high intensity burning as opposed to the posterior surface which may be greyish black, indicative of reducing conditions and less intense burning.

FL: What about weather conditions, did they affect cremation practices?

KS: This notion has interested me for some time. It is likely that weather conditions did play a role in the duration and effectiveness of cremations, and this may have also tied into the social standing of the deceased. For example, if there was a storm during the cremation of an individual and the pyre was extinguished, it is possible that mourners re-lit the pyre if the bones were perceived to be inadequately cremated (Squires 2017). It is worth highlighting that there is no evidence of ‘failed’ cremations from the period in question. In cases where individuals were of a lower social standing and the pyre died out before the bones had undergone complete calcination, the mourners may have deemed the remains to be sufficiently cremated rather than extend the funeral and relight the pyre. In contrast, mourners attending the cremation of an individual that was of a high social standing, may have waited for the rain to subside, or if it was very windy, they may have waited for calmer conditions. Once inclement weather improved, they may have continued with the funeral and associated rites due to the social status of the deceased. This, alongside seasonality issues (e.g. fuel scarcity and greater number of deaths during the winter months) is something to bear in mind, as it may have impacted the burial ritual depending on the social identity of the dead (Squires 2017).

FL: We know that dating cremation burials is hard in most cases due to their preservation. If you could send in one hundred samples for a free ^{14}C date, which site or/ graves would you spend it on?

I think chronology can be challenging when dealing with early medieval cremation cemeteries, particularly as the individuals were buried in household plots. I would therefore identify several household plots and send them for radiocarbon dating to establish whether all of the urns were buried at the same time, or if some had been retained over several years or generations. On a similar line, I would also select multiple burials, which contained two or more individuals to determine if some of the remains had been retained by living relatives and buried at a later date.

HW: You’ve just come out of co-editing a book on global ethics in bioarchaeology and forensic anthropology, you have a unique position to offer a perspective on ethical issues regarding early medieval cremation practices (Squires *et al.* 2019). Would you care to comment?

KS: In the book, there wasn’t much about cremation, I mentioned it in the destructive analysis chapter that I wrote with Thomas Booth and Charlotte Roberts (Squires *et al.* 2019), but I think there are a number of points that we need to bear in mind. Firstly, it’s fantastic that we have new techniques at our disposal (e.g. isotope analysis, radiocarbon dating, and histomorphology), but we have to bear in mind that they are destructive, even though some of these methods require a small quantity of bone. This is particularly problematic as there are often smaller quantities of skeletal elements available for study and, for example, if a deposit has a left petrous portion but the antimer is absent, sampling the available skeletal element will limit researchers of the future as they will have more advanced technologies and methods than we currently possess. In order to overcome this issue, researchers should only select a skeletal element if there are duplicates from the same individual, such as a left and right petrous bone. This is something I am extremely conscious of and when selecting dental samples for a project I am undertaking with a colleague at the University of Nottingham, I ensured the left or right equivalent tooth was present and there were five or more teeth, which is a challenge in itself but it is key that we think of the long-term preservation of skeletal remains for future generations.

Another challenge is the treatment and perception of cremated bone, largely due to its fragmentary nature. Given that it is difficult to visualise cremated remains as a complete skeleton, some do not excavate, handle, or even store the remains as carefully as they would if they were dealing with an unburnt, complete skeleton. Handling human remains is challenging due to the many fragments in larger deposits, but when removing cremated bone from receptacles, we must do so slowly and with care to avoid further breakage (e.g. the main image from a popular news item shows cremated bone being tipped out on to a tray; this speed of this is apparent and could lead to damage: Kennedy 2018) There is much to be said about the ethics of dealing with cremated bone, which has never been addressed. I am currently writing a series of ethical principles and guidelines that focus on cremated bone with Jackie McKinley, Charlotte Roberts, and Trish Biers. It is hoped this will be ready in the near future.

Conclusion

FL: Is there anything you would like to add to what we've talked about?

KS: The only thing is to emphasise again that we need to be looking at different sites and not just type-sites, notably Spong Hill. Archaeologists and bioarchaeologists need to give Elsham, Cleatham, and other early medieval cremation sites a chance, as this will provide a more comprehensive understanding of this funerary rite.

Table 11.1: Minimum number of individuals from early medieval cremation cemeteries in England

Site	MNI
Alwalton, Cambridgeshire	30
Snape, Suffolk	32
Rayleigh, Essex	118
Newark, Nottinghamshire	235
Sancton I, East Riding of Yorkshire	364
Mucking, Essex	403
Elsham, North Lincolnshire	564
Cleatham, North Lincolnshire	1,009
Spong Hill, Norfolk	2,284

Key data: Eastern England

Where do cremations occur in your research area?

Cremations in my research area typically date to the fifth to sixth century CE (though the rite continues into the seventh century in some areas) and are predominantly found in the East Midlands and East Anglia, particularly in Norfolk, Lincolnshire, and the East Riding of Yorkshire.

In what quantities do cremations occur in your research area?

Some of the early medieval cemeteries where cremation is the dominant rite are very large, whilst others are much smaller (Table 11.1). The Spong Hill cemetery is the largest such site discovered to date where 2,284 individuals were recovered (McKinley 1994). The second largest cremation dominant cemetery analysed to date is Cleatham (MNI $n = 1,009$), followed by Elsham (MNI $n = 564$), which are just 12 miles apart from one another. The size of cemeteries where cremation was principally practised varied from thirty at Alwalton (Cambridgeshire) to 403 at Mucking (Essex). It is believed the Loveden Hill cemetery (Lincolnshire) housed over 1,000 individuals though the skeletal remains have all but vanished. I have contacted museums, archaeological units, universities, and councils up and down the country but there is no sign of these bones, and no one knows what has happened to them.

In what forms are cremations deposited in your research area? Are there any indications of pyres?

Cremated human bone may be deposited individually or in a pit with other cinerary urns containing human bone, and sometimes animal bone. So-called accessory vessels

containing horses, are sometimes deposited in these contexts as well.

Very few cremation pyres have been identified from early medieval contexts in England, and those that have been uncovered have been identified with varying degrees of certainty (Squires 2011). These potential pyre sites have been noted at Sancton I (Myres and Southern 1973; McKinley 1993), Snape (Suffolk) (Filmer-Sankey 1992; Carnegie and Filmer-Sankey 1993; Filmer-Sankey *et al.* 2001), and Asthall Barrow (Oxfordshire) (Dickinson and Speake 1992). This raises many questions about the location of pyre sites as the archaeological evidence suggests that cremations did not take place at these cemeteries.

What types of containers are associated with cremations?

Cremated human bone was primarily deposited in pottery cinerary urns (which Dr Gareth Perry explored in another interview). These vessels were of differing forms and sizes, decoration, and some exhibited the use of lead plugs (Elsham: $n = 7$; Cleatham: $n = 10$) (Squires 2011). There were a small number of unurned human bone deposits. At Elsham there were 29 such deposits (5.3%) and at Cleatham only 13 deposits were found to be unurned (1.3%). At Elsham the quantity of bone deposited varied from 7.30g (EL75AV) to 1,762.40g (EL76KL(b)), while at Cleatham the unurned cremated human remains weighed between 1.80g (MT85MI) to 790.80g (MT84NA). These unurned interments could potentially represent redeposited burials. However, some of the larger quantities of bone may have once been held in organic bags or containers but, as a result of taphonomic processes, these receptacles have not survived.

Are there funerary monuments or other structures surrounding cremations in your research area?

Howard Williams (1997, 2002) has discussed this extensively in his own work. Early medieval cremation-dominant cemeteries are frequently located near prominent landmarks, such as prehistoric monuments, strategic positions in the landscape, and geological features. Elsham is positioned by a Roman road and there is a prehistoric ditch in the south-west corner of the cemetery; two Bronze Age inhumations were associated with this feature (Squires 2011). The Cleatham cemetery is situated within 500 m of the Mount Pleasant Roman villa and Leahy (2007) observes that masonry from the villa was taken to the Cleatham cemetery. When the Cleatham cemetery was discovered by Trollope in 1856, there was some evidence of a tumulus. As Howard has noted in his research, these landmarks may have acted as features to demarcate the location of a cemetery or to act as a meeting place (Williams 1997).

Is there any noteworthy spatial patterning of cremation burials on the sites they occur on?

No spatial patterning of cremation burials has been noted to date. Individuals were not segregated or grouped together based on their age, sex, or gender. Instead, it would appear that individuals were potentially buried in household plots where immediate family and extended kin (i.e. non-blood related kin.) Interestingly, the West Saxon law code *Ine* 63 notes the extended household of thanes, which may have some relation to earlier socio-cultural traditions (see Squires 2019). This has been observed at Mucking, Spong Hill, Cleatham, and Elsham. The use of biomolecular techniques may provide greater insight into spatial patterns at cremation cemeteries in years to come.

What trends can be observed regarding the occurrence of cremation burials throughout time in your research area?

This isn't something I focused upon but certainly needs exploring. When I was completing my doctoral research the Elsham pottery assemblage had not been fully assessed and it was beyond the scope of my research given the number of burials I had to analyse. However, some conclusions can be drawn between Romano-British cremations from Folly Lane (St Albans, Hertfordshire) and early medieval cremation deposits from Elsham. At both sites variable burning intensities were observed, but a greater number of individuals from Folly Lane reached temperatures over 1,000°C (Carroll and Squires 2020b). This may represent the use of *ustores* (or professional cremators) at the Roman town of Verulamium, which we don't see during the early medieval period (Carroll and Squires 2020a).

Where osteological data are available, is there any apparent selection of deceased according to their sex or age?

There is no apparent selection of the dead. Both males and females are represented at Elsham (58 adults, 18.1%) and

Cleatham (147 adults, 29.2%), with a higher proportion of females from both sites (Squires 2012). This has similarly been observed at other cremation dominant cemeteries, e.g. Spong Hill, Sancton I, and Newark (Nottinghamshire) (Squires 2012). All age groups, including infants and children, were also recorded at each of these cemeteries. Older adults (e.g. individuals over 41 years old) are noted from Elsham and Cleatham, but are in very low numbers compared to those identified at Sancton I and, to a lesser extent, Spong Hill (Squires 2012). Trends in these data are addressed in a later question.

When objects occur with cremations, what type of objects are they? (do they tend to be burnt or unburnt?)

Animal offerings played a significant role in early medieval cremations in England and are found with all ages and both males and females (McKinley 1994; Bond 1996; Bond and Worley 2006; Squires 2013). These remains are predominantly burnt, that is, they were placed on the funerary pyre. Bone and antler combs are recovered in many cremated bone deposits. The majority of these objects are unburnt and are found with individuals of all ages, and both males and females. Howard Williams (2003, 2005) has explored this in previous papers. All other objects offered to the dead were burned on the pyre. These items include beads (from jewellery), spindle whorls, rings, toilet sets and miniatures, brooches, and, less commonly, knives and weaponry. Many of these objects were taken from everyday contexts and the (functional) nature of many items may have been linked to the individual's identity during life (Squires 2011).

What relationship existed between inhumation burials and cremation burials in your research area? Do they occur on the same site, or even in the same grave context?

To my knowledge, all cremation dominant cemeteries also contain inhumation burials, though some occur in very small numbers, for example only one inhumation was identified at Sancton I (Timby 1993). Inhumations and cremated bone deposits are intermingled and used at the same time throughout much of the life of these sites. At Cleatham there was little association between the two rites in that urns were not found in inhumation burials. Leahy (2007) noted that where there was a relationship between inhumation and cremation, in that inhumations always cut cremations (n=32). At Spong Hill, this also occurred on two occasions, though in 17 instances, cremations were cut into grave fills (Hills et al. 1984). In the majority of occasions, these appear to be coincidental, for example, unaware of the location of previous burials (Leahy 2007; Hills and Lucy 2013), though at Spong Hill this appeared to be intentional on eight occasions (Hills and Lucy 2013).

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Potted Histories: Insights into Early Medieval Cremation Practices from the Study of Funerary Ceramics

Gareth Perry

Early medieval cremation remains from England are typically contained within elaborately decorated ceramic vessels. For many years it was assumed that these urns had been made specifically for the deceased, at the time of the funeral. Our understanding of these vessels has been transformed over the last decade, with the realisation that the urns were in fact reused domestic vessels, likely used in the production of fermented foodstuffs such as beer. This chapter considers the insights that the study of ceramic vessels can provide on varied aspects of the rite, from the selection of appropriate vessels to hold the remains of the dead, the organisation of burial plots within cemeteries, to the extent of a cemetery's catchment area.

Urns, ceramics, catchment area, hinterland, cremation cemetery, community

Introduction

Femke Lippok: Could you introduce yourself and your work relating to early medieval cremation burials?

Gareth Perry: I'm Gareth Perry, and I started working on early medieval cremation burials probably around 2009. As part of a Master's project, I started looking at an early Anglo-Saxon cemetery called South Elkington (Lincolnshire). My focus was on ceramics more than the process of cremation, but that's where I started and I've gone on from there. There have been two main areas of my research. First, how were cremation urns used before they were utilised as containers for the dead? Second, determining the provenance of cremation urns as a means of understanding the extent of a cemetery's catchment area.

New research for cremation in eastern England

FL: Which site in your research area featuring cremation burials deserves more attention, and why?

GP: South Elkington, which is in the middle of Lincolnshire. It was excavated in the 1940s. Nearly three hundred cremations were uncovered, which are thought to represent about a quarter of the whole cemetery (Webster and Myres 1952). South Elkington is peculiar because hardly any grave goods were found; only thirty urns are recorded as having associated finds. Other sites in Lincolnshire, such as Cleatham and Elsham have far richer grave-good assemblages (Leahy 2007), but South Elkington has next to none. When I was initially researching this site, I visited the archives in Lincolnshire. There was a letter there, a type-written letter from John Nowell Linton Myres, the godfather of Anglo-Saxon pottery studies, who'd looked at and reported on this material back in the 1950s. The letter said something along the lines of:

There are very few grave goods with these cremated remains. And the few that have produced grave goods, I've put the grave goods in an envelope and then put the envelope with the bones that they belonged to. The rest of the bones that didn't have anything associated with them, I don't see any point in keeping.

The implication was that those cremated remains that didn't have associated finds had just been disposed of. So, you essentially have something like three hundred cremations, of which only c. 10% remain. I don't know where that small assemblage of cremated remains is now though. The pots are definitely in Lincoln Museum. Myres was based in the Bodleian in Oxfordshire, but he'd looked at the urns and grave goods when they were at the Institute of Archaeology in London. Whatever happened, you essentially have a cemetery that could be as large as Cleatham (c. one thousand burials), of which a quarter has been excavated, and apart from about thirty urns, the contents have more-or-less been disposed of.

So, South Elkington really deserves more attention. The site is deserving of further excavation. We need to undertake osteological analysis of newly excavated remains so that we can find out who was buried there, and then we need to understand why there were so few grave goods. The site is also on farmland and is still under the plough, so there's a rescue element to this too. How badly has it been affected over the last half to three quarters of a century? But the thing that really stands out is why we have this cemetery that follows other patterns of cremation burial in Lincolnshire (and early Anglo-Saxon England more broadly) in terms of location and the decoration on urns, but it doesn't have grave goods.

FL: So, it couldn't be excavation methods affecting the recovery of grave goods?

GP: Myres (Webster and Myres 1952: 64) did comment on the fact that this absence was peculiar. He noted that grave goods that were found were burnt, and there were none of the unburnt finds that have been noted at other cemeteries, so he raised the question as to whether the practice of cremation was different, and whether it was burial practice or the process of burning that gave rise to the absence of finds.

Howard Williams: I must admit I did assume the worst, that they'd missed the grave goods. And there is the issue of the difficulty of identifying bone-objects. But still, that absence of grave goods is incredible. But then there is the site of Rayleigh in Essex (Ennis 2008), have you come across this one? It's a cremation cemetery but in an East Saxon area. But the thing about it is that it's got very few grave goods. So, I hadn't really made the connection because it's geographically far away, but that sounds like a better excavated version of South Elkington.

GP: No, I've not looked at that one. In the report on South Elkington, there is mention of piles of flint that were used for marking graves (Webster and Myres 1952). We don't normally see big piles of flint as grave markers. We've picked up things like posts that have been placed in the same burial pit as the urn – like those at Fonaby (Mayes and Dean 1976) – that might have acted as erect, above-ground grave markers. It would be interesting to excavate the remainder of South Elkington and see how frequent those piles of flint are and what the links might be between Rayleigh. But as to how distinct the North Lincolnshire sites are from other places; they fit into the big picture, but there are local differences that I think deserve more attention.

Cremation cemetery catchment areas

FL: Could you explain the topography of cemeteries and settlements in your research area and the concept of catchment areas therein?

GP: There are three cremation cemeteries in North Lincolnshire. Cleatham and Elsham are the really big cremation cemeteries. Cleatham has close to one thousand burials and Elsham six hundred (Leahy 2007); far larger than almost all early Anglo-Saxon period inhumation and mixed-rite cemeteries in Eastern England. We know very little about the third cemetery – Bagmoor – as it was destroyed by ironstone mining in 1928 (Dudley 1949: 224–226; Leahy 2007: 11–13). Cleatham and Elsham are on opposite sides of the River Ancholme; they are about 15km apart. The cemeteries both occupy high ground and the surrounding settlements focus within c. 6km of each cemetery, and spill down the slope towards the west. At Elsham, that slope dips down towards the

River Ancholme, and at Cleatham, it drops towards the River Trent (Perry 2020). So, they occupy very similar topographical locations, and you can have a whole discussion there about inter-visibility, with cemeteries on high ground and settlements lower down (e.g. Williams 2004; Chester-Kadwell 2013).

When I recognised dense settlement concentration around these cemeteries, I did wonder whether this pattern was a result of targeted fieldwalking around known cemetery sites. Kevin Leahy, when he was the curator of the North Lincolnshire Museum, and excavating at Cleatham, led a series of field walking campaigns around these cemeteries. Actually, if you look at the spread of archaeological interventions across the whole of North Lincolnshire, there is hardly anywhere that has not had some form of intervention and so these clusters of settlement around the cremation cemeteries are real (Perry 2020). These clusters seem to suggest a catchment area of c. 6km radius. Beyond and between those catchment areas we find no evidence of settlement. It was Howard's 'Cemeteries as Central Places' (Williams 2002) paper which made me start thinking about catchment areas and I was keen to find a way to ascertain their extent. I was able to do that through petrographic analysis of cremation urns and pottery from settlement sites which confirmed the c. 6 km limit of their catchment areas (Perry 2020).

Using pottery to define catchment areas

FL: Could you explain your methodology of using pottery to define catchment areas?

GP: So, I basically used ceramic petrology, which is a technique which has been used by archaeologists for more than half a century to understand the provenance of ceramics (e.g., Peacock 1969; Whitbread 1995). The technique is borrowed from geology. It's based on being able to identify the minerals and rock fragments found in ceramics – essentially, the raw materials that are used to make ceramics. Then we look to identify where those raw materials were obtained from. That might be achieved by comparing the mineralogical composition of the pottery with descriptions of mineralogy of different geological deposits in geological memoirs and maps, or comparison with actual geological samples taken from the field. It might also be done by comparing the pottery with sherds obtained from known production sites.

What I did to understand the catchment areas of the cemeteries was to undertake petrographic analysis of pottery from settlement and cemetery sites in North Lincolnshire, and then compare the two (Perry 2020). So, the first stage was to make the petrographic thin sections. These were then studied using a polarising microscope, then I drew on geological memoirs to help me understand the provenance of raw materials. North Lincolnshire is

particularly good for this type of approach. If you look at the geological maps of the area you see band after band of different types of geology. This diversity means that you can identify the source of raw materials used to make the pottery quite accurately. For example, I know that on one side of the river I'm going to find a particular type of sandstone and that I'm not going to find a sandstone with those characteristics on the other side of the river. Essentially, we have characteristic geology on the eastern side of the River Ancholme that the Elsham urns are made from, and the pottery found at Cleatham and its surrounding settlements matches the geology west of the river.

With a sense of where the raw materials were drawn from, I then compared the thin sections of cremation urns with thin sections of settlement pottery. In some cases, I was literally putting a thin section of a cremation urn next to a thin section of a settlement sherd and couldn't tell the difference between the two. This allowed me to identify settlements from which individual urns likely originated from, which I then used to draw 'ceramic hinterlands' around each cemetery, that by proxy revealed the extent of each cemetery's catchment area. Both Elsham and Cleatham had similar sized catchment areas of c. 6km radius (Perry 2020).

FL: In your model, do catchment areas overlap?

GP: The large cremation cemeteries' catchment areas don't overlap. They seem to be discrete. What you do get is the occasional pot that seems to have come from outside the catchment area. But then, when you look at the distribution of pottery more broadly, you get similar amounts of 'non-local' pottery moving between settlement sites as you do in the cemeteries. So, I think when you find a pot outside its catchment, it's probably more a reflection of pots moving in the day to day rather than someone coming from outside the catchment area (Perry 2020). Where things do start to get complicated is when we get these smaller mixed-rite and inhumation cemeteries that emerge in the sixth century. They seem to occupy positions at the periphery of the cremation cemeteries' catchment areas. At that point, perhaps things do begin to overlap, but any overlap is not between the large cremation cemeteries, it's with the catchment of these smaller cemeteries. I think this is probably representative of a decline in importance and influence of the large cremation cemeteries, with perhaps a corresponding contraction of their catchment areas.

FL: That's fascinating, it definitely conjures up questions around how these peoples relate to one another. Imagine things like mobility as a result of marriages and family relations: there must have been interactions and

movements between the settlements (Sayer 2014: 79). So when you die, are you then put in a pot from your settlement of origin, or do you receive a pot from the settlement you ended up in? Those sorts of questions.

GP: Yes, exactly as you just said. There's a group of similarly decorated pots that were found at Cleatham, which have become known as the Daisy Grid pots because the urns were decorated with pendant triangles and daisy and grid shaped stamps. Kevin Leahy identified about a dozen of these Daisy Grid pots at Cleatham (Leahy 2007: 114). I found one in Elsham. I undertook petrographic analysis of a sample of these pots and discovered that all of them were made using raw materials that had been obtained close to Cleatham, and from within Cleatham's catchment area, even the Elsham pot, and so that Elsham pot was drawn from a settlement outside of Elsham's catchment area (Perry 2013, 2020). That raises a whole host of questions. How has it got there? Has it been given in a marriage, or other sort of gift-giving ceremony? Is it someone who came from near Elsham but in later life lived close to Cleatham and upon death was returned to an ancestral burial ground? Is it someone who for a time lived close to Cleatham, moved to the other side of the river and took their pots with them, and when they died, were buried in their local cemetery? I'd love to be able to pin it down further, but I just don't think that's going to be possible. Given that pots moved in the course of daily life, I don't think we can answer whether Elsham's Daisy Grid pot moved as part of day-to-day activities or something more.

FL: What about the role of these large cremation cemeteries as central places (of ritual)?

GP: They must be central places of ritual practice. Just the act of putting someone in a pot and then putting that pot in the ground is a ritualistic behaviour, these people are being drawn from across each cemetery's catchment area, coming from up to c.6km away, which is quite a distance. Howard pointed out that a lot of these early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries are associated with pre-existing landscape features, ancient routeways, and that they also occupy prominent locations, they're intervisible with settlement sites, they are not stuck out in the middle of nowhere (Williams 1997; 1998). The cemeteries that I have studied are no different. At Elsham, for example, there is an ancient routeway – Middlegate Lane – that goes past its western edge and continues northwards to the Humber Estuary (Perry 2013). The process of transportation along routeways to the cemetery would have been ritualistic in itself. So, I absolutely think that they are to be seen as central places and the activities that took place there have to be considered ritualistic.

FL: Do you think people were cremated at the cemetery, or were they burning them at home and only moved the pot containing the bones? Is there any evidence of pyres or something like that?

GP: I can't think of an example of a pyre having been excavated at a settlement, so I guess that's open to interpretation, with the usual challenges that absence of evidence does not equal evidence of absence. We must also consider whether a pyre might be correctly identified as a pyre site if one were found at a settlement site, or would it just be interpreted as an area of burning? I would've thought that if you found an area of burning at a cemetery, you might be more inclined to interpret it as a pyre site. And I guess a pyre site that had been repeatedly used would be more recognisable (from an accumulation of burnt bone) than one which had been used only once or twice. There are only a handful of putative pyre sites from cemeteries (Squires, this volume), but these are very few.

Given that the cremation urns are coming from the settlements, I don't see why cremations themselves wouldn't have taken place at the settlement with the family and acquaintances around. It's much easier to carry a pot filled with bones down the road than it is to carry a body, fuel and all the other accoutrements of the funeral rite, but until we find an unequivocal pyre site, we can only postulate.

FL: You've written about how important it is to include mixed-rite cemeteries into the model of these large cremation cemeteries. What are your thoughts on this now? How do inhumations fit in? What is their relation to cremation burials?

GP: A lot of those smaller mixed-rite cemeteries in eastern England were established after the large cremation cemeteries were established. I think it gives you insights into how the community perception of the large cremation cemeteries changed through time. There was a decline in the importance of large cremation cemeteries in the sixth century. As to how the inhumation burials fit in, at Cleatham, you've got inhumation graves cutting cremation burials and cremation burials overlaying inhumation graves, so they're clearly contemporaneous, they're related practices happening alongside each other at the same burial site (Leahy 2007). That's the same situation in the mixed-rite cemeteries too. Even though they are slightly later in date, they are still happening contemporaneously.

HW: Yes, so even though there is a shift toward inhumation over time and small mixed-cemeteries, equally balance that with a realisation that inhumation was always an option, and cremation was always an option. It's

not an either/or. And that's a contrast to how continental cremations have been approached often, where inhumations and cremations are kept separate with dichotomous interpretations.

Pre-burial use of cremation urns

FL: What factors did you look at to determine what urns were used for before their deposition in a mortuary context?

GP: I used a technique called use-alteration analysis. It's been used by pottery specialists for years. Basically, you look to identify changes to vessel surfaces that arise out of use. James Skibo (1992; 2013) formalised the approach back in the 1990s, and his work has been added to by people like John Arthur (2002; 2003). Skibo undertook ethnographic work amongst the Kalinga in the Philippines. He systematically recorded how pots were used and the development of characteristic markers, which were indicative of particular use-activities. Where Skibo had focused on abrasion of pottery surfaces through use and the development of soot patches, John Arthur looked at how things like fermentational processes affected vessel surfaces. I used their work to look for markers on cremation urns and domestic pottery that might indicate if and how cremation urns have been used before burial.

I have to say, when I first began working with cremation urns, I wasn't interested in this in the slightest: I was more interested in determining the extent of catchment areas. I'd been through all of the Elsham urns and selected samples to make thin sections from, and I'd just moved on to the Cleatham urns. I took the first Cleatham pot out of the box and noticed that the interior had completely disappeared. The exterior was fine, but the interior of the pot had just eroded completely. I'd noticed this before on the Elsham urns but it not being my primary interest, I'd not really paid attention to it. I guess I'd assumed these were just low-fired pots that had had a hard life, that they'd been under the plough, that they'd been smashed about. But then you start thinking surely if this was taphonomic then the damage to the internal surface should be on the external surface too. How was it that complete pots had their internal surfaces missing but their outsides were fine? So, I took out this Cleatham urn with a perfect external surface, but no internal surface and thought there has got to be something more happening here. That's what set me on the use-alteration search to find out what might cause interior surface to be completely eroded. I came across the Skibo's (1992) and Arthur's (2002; 2003) work and could see the same type of use-related attrition that Arthur had observed ethnographically when pots had been used to make things that ferment, like beer, and at that point it becomes obvious that these pots had been used before they were selected to contain the remains of the dead (Perry 2011; 2013). That's totally in contrast to the way these urns had been viewed

by archaeologists in the past. Accepted wisdom had been that urns had been made for the funeral and that the decoration was epitaphic and made clear statements about the person whose remains it contained (Wilson 1965; Laing and Laing 1979; Richards 1987; Leahy 2007). So, after spotting these markers and realising what I was looking at, I made sure to systematically record evidence of use on the Cleatham urns, and then I went back to the Elsham pots and did the same.

FL: Did you find that only specific types of pottery were used for the cremation deposition? What were the pre-burial functions of these urns? You mentioned that fermentation was one of the pre-depositional functions of the cremation urns. What other functions could you define?

GP: So, yes, things like brewing beer, or dairying activities, processes that involve lactic acid producing bacteria, these are the types of activities that cause the particular type of attrition that I had noticed on the inside of cremation urns (Perry 2011; 2013).

Whilst I was analysing the pots, I got the sense that it was decorated urns that tended to have this type of attrition. Doing some statistical analysis on that revealed that was in fact the case, this internal attrition, indicative of fermentation processes was directly related to the presence of decoration (Perry 2011; 2013). Conversely, undecorated, plain pots didn't tend to have this internal attrition: they were more likely to have soot deposits on the outside. I also identified instances of decorated and undecorated urns, with no soot or internal attrition, that had been used. Their bases were abraded through contact with rough surfaces, such as the hearth or floor. It's not clear exactly how they were used, but they clearly had been used. The proportions of pots that showed evidence of having been used were very high. At Cleatham, looking at the complete vessels, 31% were internally pitted, 8% had soot on them, 52% possessed basal abrasion, with a total of 71% of urns showing signs of use before burial - more-or-less the same proportions were noted at Elsham (Perry 2011; 2013).

FL: In terms of the form and decoration of urns – what potential do they have in telling us about the cremation rite? Do the decoration or sizes of the pots for example relate to sex and age of the deceased?

GP: Some of the things that Julian D. Richards (1987) spotted in his study of the relationship between form and decoration of cremation urns with age and gender of the people whose remains they contained was that women tended to be in wider-mouthed vessels, men in restricted-necked vessels, children were in small pots, and adults in taller pots. So, there was a clear relationship between

the form of the pot, size of the pot and the people whose bones are put inside them.

I looked at the functional aspects of those individual forms (Perry 2014). Ethnography shows us that users tend to classify vessels according to function (e.g. rice pots, vegetable pots, beer-brewing pots) and these pots often have specific functional attributes that relate to that particular use (Longacre 1981; Linares de Sapir 1969; Rice 2005; Perry 2014). Studies of folk classifications (Kempton 1981; Rice 2005: 284) show that when users classify pots, one of the main things they focus on are ratios such as the height to width ratio or the orifice diameter to maximum diameter. They may then also include other functional attributes, such as capacity/size, handles or spouts (Longacre 1981; Kempton 1981; Labov 1973). I tried to look at urns from this perspective; how these pots might have been classified by their users (Perry 2014). I divided the forms up into these different functional groups, first according to ratios (e.g. width: height, orifice: maximum diameter), then their capacity. This revealed some very clear functional groupings which can be readily tied to the various stages in the production of fermented beverages, such as beer. There are those pots that are more functionally suited to soaking grains and stewing them, those that might have been used for the actual fermentation, or the serving, or these smaller pots that might be used for consumption (Perry 2014).

This shows that there are clearly defined roles within the sequence of production, and so given the relationships noted by Richards, peoples' cremation urns were selected from the range of available options and these were tied to certain stages in the sequence of production. The children might end up in little drinking vessels, whereas men might end up in the big fermentation pots that hold large quantities of liquid that are then tipped out to serve. The wider mouthed pots, more suited for soaking and stewing of grains to allow the sugars to develop for brewing, are associated with women (Richards 1987; Perry 2014). There are those that argue that the relationship between form and person within indicate that the pot was made for the person upon death, but actually, you would see the same relationships if you chose a culturally acceptable vessel for a particular person from a range of available alternatives.

I think it does give you quite some insight into the cremation rite, not into the burning itself but the bringing together of a container to hold the cremains, the grave goods, and all those other things that might have been used to prepare the body before the fire. In selecting a pot then, the first level is making sure that they chose a pot that was part of the brewing process, and the next level is that an appropriate pot is selected according to the person and stage of the brewing process that the pot was attached to.

FL: We've touched on this already, but would you like to reiterate anything regarding how the use of ethnographic sources inspired your work?

GP: I would say that rather than looking at ethnographic studies and analogies related to cremation, I've looked at the ethnographic record for ceramic use and manufacture. That's where my main interest comes, and it's fortuitous that it's helped me to understand Anglo-Saxon cremation practice.

HW: I have an additional question: isn't there a bigger point here about the challenge that all ceramic studies face? Whatever question you are asking about production, manufacture and patterns on the pots, we have this challenge of either over-emphasising the pot's importance or we underplay it as simply an index of something important happening away from the pot. What is your thinking on that? On one level, we see them as relatively humble pots that are almost incidental to the theatre of burial. And what you should be saying is that this is an important stage in the ritual and the pot is significant but equally you are making clear insights in trying to down-play it in this symbolic-over-emphasis of how this is a sacred vessel that everyone has been worshipping for decades: Monty Python-style 'Holy Grails' as it were. I wonder how you feel your work is navigated those polar extremes of archaeologists either downplaying pottery or over-emphasising it as symbolic material culture.

GP: I think this goes into what I really try to emphasise in one of the modules that I teach at the University of York. In the module, we look at the production of pottery right from procurement of raw materials to pots coming out of the firing structure at the end of the production process: the *chaîne opératoire*. What we focus on is how imbued with social significance each stage of the production sequence can be and often is (e.g. Arnold 1985; Gosselain 1992, 1994, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2008; Mahias 1993). There is a whole raft of ethnographic literature which demonstrates that things like social taboos might have a huge impact upon pottery making. So, things like teething children can't go into the clay-pit because their gums are red and hot, and they'll impact upon the clay and the pot will fail. Or menstruating women can't do the same because they're considered hot and dangerous (Gosselain 1999) or access to particular technologies such as the potters' wheel might be restricted to certain social groups because it's bound up in belief systems (Mahias 1993). So, the actual production sequence of ceramics is so socially embedded: as soon as a vessel is produced and goes into the sphere of use its already part of the identity of the people who made it. That's what I'm really interested in. Even though we might downplay a sherd as a cruddy bit of pot that's come out of the ground

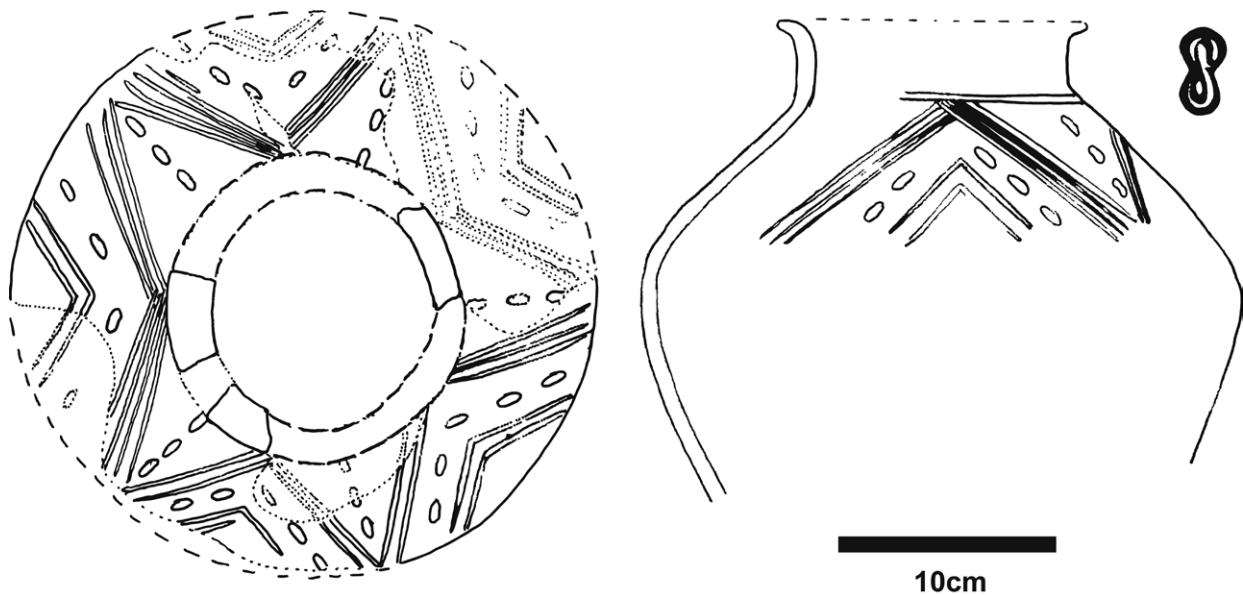


Figure 12.1: South Elkington Urn 151 viewed from above (left) and from the side (right). The side on view is how cremation urns are traditionally illustrated. The view from above is how vessels would have been perceived when used for pouring, serving, storage and when the vessel was placed in the ground, containing cremated remains (illustration by G Perry)

with little significance, to me that's the end-product of a life of manufacture and use. That tiny bit of sherd is imbued with life events which were socially significant.

The socially embedded nature of pottery production, use, discard and deposition is sometimes lost when our perception of pottery is limited to the conventions of archaeological descriptions and illustrations. For instance, when you draw a cremation urn, and you see it from the side, you see all those repeating patterns, but it's a two-dimensional image. Yet, if you take those chevron-decorated pots, for instance, and you look at them from the top, they look like stylised stars or suns (Figure 12.1.) Julian D. Richards (1992) pointed this out in the 1990s. And so, if we think about fermentation vessels, the ones with the narrow necks and wide bodies – those types of pots that would be really suited to aid the fermentational process – when you think about how you serve drinks out, the view that we present in a flat two-dimensional, side-on image is very different to how these pots would have been seen in use. I imagine these pots being in a house with people sat around the fire drinking. People would've viewed the pot from the top when it was used to pour into the drinking vessel, they would have seen the star-shape and the repeated decoration going round the mouth of the pot as the liquid came out. In this context of use these pots become embedded within social relationships between their users – that relationship between the person who gives the drink, the food, and hospitality to neighbours, friends and family, and those who receive it. These pots then take on a special significance in daily life, and because

of that, when they are taken out of use and someone's remains are put in them, that would potentially be a great honour, to go into that vessel that's been involved in so many socially significant events.

I think that is very different to the kind of view of: 'I am the epitaph of the person'. These pots have so many levels of meaning and social significance, as a domestic vessel used in daily social activities and at the level of production, and then at the end of it all they are selected to hold the deceased, placed in the ground, and viewed from above by mourners, looking at it for one final time as they would have seen it in use, with the person inside, framed by the sun or star that radiated from the mouth. These are significant events in the life of these pots, which imbue them with meaning, and I don't think you can separate them from one another.

FL: I have an additional question about family plots – do you think that similar decoration on pots indicates a similar origin and thus signifies a family relationship?

GP: Whenever you look at a cemetery report, you're more-or-less guaranteed to find reference to Stamp Groups (e.g. Hills *et al.* 1987; 1994; Kinsley 1989). You'll find a handful of pots that are decorated with the same five or six (or combination of) stamp designs. They tend to be located very close to one another in the cemetery, sometimes even in the same burial pit. This has led to the suggestion that people might be buried in family groups. I agree, but I don't think that we should limit ourselves to Stamp Groups when

trying to understand this. When I looked at Elsham and Cleatham, rather than saying 'let's look for Stamp Groups', I started to look at the broad types of decoration that were used and whether there was any similarity in the decoration on pots that were buried close together. Kevin Leahy (2007) produced a very useful classification system for categorising the urns from Cleatham. It starts very simply, with something like the chevron design – typically lines around the neck and chevrons just above the shoulder. His next stage up was chevrons with stamps, then chevrons with bosses, and finally chevrons with stamps and bosses. I used his classificatory system to investigate where individual styles of decoration were located in the cemeteries of Elsham and Cleatham. What I could see is that similarly decorated pots were found within proximity of one another. Some were directly adjacent to one another, some just a few metres apart, but close enough together to see a connection between them (Perry 2013).

We spoke earlier about the social embeddedness of pots, I get the sense that if people are using pots within the daily regime, they're exposed to the different types of decoration on pots made and used by their peers. This exposure has the potential to influence the decoration that they then apply to pots they make themselves. This gives rise to decoration that is socially significant. Going back to ethnography, there are some amazing accounts of people working in groups to decorate pots. There's this wonderful study of pottery decoration amongst the Luo of Kenya (Herbich 1987), where potters work in groups, decorating their wares. There's this one particular potter who is a really proficient artist who decorated her pots with really beautiful designs, but then the rest of the potting community refused to copy what she did or imitate any of her designs because they considered her to be a complainer, just a bit of moaner. There's another potter within the group that people really liked, and the rest of the potting community tried to emulate and copy her designs. If you take that as an analogy and look beyond the Stamp Group to where you have pots that are similarly decorated in cemeteries, then we might start to see some of these social relationships. We can begin to see how these decorative styles might be developed in the course of manufacture, and also that people might be exposed to them in use, and that leads us to think about cultural forms of decoration, and specifically styles of decoration that might be particularly prevalent in one small community than it is in another. Interestingly, Julian D. Richards noticed that some styles of decoration were more common in some cemeteries than others. For example, standing arch motifs were more common than hanging arches on urns found at South Elkington, but it was the other way around at Illington in Suffolk. And upright chevrons were more common than reversed chevrons at South Elkington, but the opposite of that at Sancton (Richards 1987: table 9).

None of the makers or decorators are explicitly stating 'I belong to this community', but this clustering of similarly decorated pots is a representation of relationships between communities of people who make and use the pots that then get transferred in the cemetery, through community and familial burial plots or areas.

Cremation in context

FL: What is the generally accepted explanation for the occurrence of cremations in your research area? What's the background of this interpretation?

GP: So, the collapse of Roman rule in Britain brings with it an influx of migrant groups. Bede (a late seventh/early eighth-century Northumbrian monk, writing long after the events), describes these migrant groups as the Saxons, Jutes and Angles who arrived from the Continent. With this influx of migrants, we see new material culture and new burial rites. Often these new burial rites were attributed to the different groups – the Angles do this, the Saxons do that, one group cremates, the other inhumes (e.g. Myres 1986). As we were discussing earlier, people were performing cremation and inhumation side by side, and so it's much more complex than that. But the appearance of cremation has certainly been attributed to incoming groups of settlers.

FL: What is your take on the interpretation that cremation is an ethnically defined practice?

GP: The practice of cremation, and the basis of the early Anglo-Saxon cremation rite, arrived in England from the Continent. When you look at the burial rites and the form and decoration of pots, they are the same in England as they were on the Continent. Myres' (1986) *The English Settlements* is based entirely upon drawing parallels between the pottery from England with that found in northern Germany and Denmark. There's no way that it was an insular development (e.g. Hills and Lucy 2013: 297–331). These migrant groups arrived in England and brought with them a series of new ways of dealing with the dead. But then you get into the discussions about whether the settlers completely replaced the indigenous population, or how the indigenous population reacted to and adopted these new burial rites. For me, I think these groups are not clear cut and people are doing what they need to do in the forming of new identities in what was a very turbulent time. Ultimately, it's these new identities which give rise to what we recognise as early Anglo-Saxon cremation rites.

FL: Would you say that the (cremation) burial repertoires in North Lincolnshire are regionally distinct? How do they compare to surrounding regions?

GP: They fall within the remit of what you expect of early Anglo-Saxon England. You've got Spong Hill, Cleatham, Loveden Hill, they're all big cremation cemeteries, but I think that there are local differences, perhaps not regional, but local. For instance, looking at it from the pottery perspective, I observed that particular types of tempering material seemed to be very local choices, and not just because of variations in geology. When I looked at Cleatham I had lots of pots that had probably been tempered with animal dung, but at Elsham, just across the river, there were almost none (Perry 2013, 2020). If you look at grave goods, we have big grave good assemblages in Elsham and Cleatham (Leahy 2007) but then just down the road at South Elkington, we have almost none (Webster and Myres 1952).

Methodological advances

FL: What new discoveries or ideas offer exciting new avenues for the study of early medieval cremations? What methodological advances do you see influencing the study of early medieval cremations in the foreseeable future?

GP: I would like to see someone go and do use-alteration analysis on other cremation cemeteries. If you look at cemetery reports, people haven't been looking for this characteristic internal pitting, or abrasion and so they are not going to find it. There is no systematic recording of the internal surface in the Spong Hill volumes (Hills *et al.* 1984: 1987), nor is there in the Mucking cemetery reports (Hirst and Clark 2009) and the problem is that these are the type sites for cremation burial. There is tantalising evidence that pre-burial use is not restricted to Cleatham and Elsham, or surrounding settlement sites. At the Newark Millgate cemetery, for instance, Kinsley (1989: 56–58) notes of urn 265 that the outside surface was 'smoothed to lightly burnished' yet inside the 'entire surface [was] missing' and in the analysis of the pottery from the settlement at Mucking we find in the pot catalogue that vessel GH 103's exterior was 'carefully smoothed, then lightly burnished' whilst the 'black interior [was] smoothed and flaking' (GH 103) (Hamerow 1993: 143, and figure 138). This is undoubtedly the same attrition that I've noted. So, there needs to be a systematic analysis of cremation urns from across early Anglo-Saxon England.

We've made all these advances in lipid and residue analysis too, so let's go and do that. When this has been done on cremation urns the focus has tended to be on the plain pots that have sooting deposits on them, like in the analysis of urns from Mucking (Hirst and Clark 2009). Well, the vast majority of pots aren't sooted at cemeteries, so they are not representative, so let's go and do residue analysis on all of those decorated pots and see where we are then.

HW: Yes, so it's clear to say that there are sites where this work hasn't been done, including Mucking (Essex) and Spong Hill (Norfolk). There hasn't been a book trying to bring all of this together. It certainly sounds like there is potential to apply this approach to Continental cremation cemeteries as well.

Concluding thoughts

FL: We know that dating cremation burials is hard in most cases due to their preservation. If you could send in one hundred samples for a free ^{14}C date, which site/graves would you spend it on?

GP: There are a few really odd pots that were found at Cleatham that I think need more work on their dating. They seem to be wheel thrown, so not like other early Anglo-Saxon pottery (Leahy 2007). They look very Roman, but if you show them to Roman pottery specialists, they don't want to identify them as 'Roman' because their fabrics aren't quite right; they are more like the fabric of Early Anglo-Saxon pottery. But you then show these pots to Early Anglo-Saxon pottery specialists, and they don't want them either because the forms, decoration and way of making are just wrong for the period, and so no one knows what to do with these things. If you could get ^{14}C dating on the contents of those pots, then I think that would help us to understand these pots a little better. But then, I guess there's the issue of resolution. I can imagine we'd get a really broad result that just said fifth or sixth century. There are examples of this type in other cemeteries too, for instance at Newark (Kinsley 1989), so it would be good to do a survey of these pots and date their contents.

FL: Is there anything you would like to add to what we've talked about?

GP: What I did realise when I was thinking about these questions was that I've looked at cremation urns as someone who studies pots rather than someone who studies cremation burial or Anglo-Saxon archaeology. I never really realised that until you put these questions in front of me. I mean, yes, I am an early medievalist, but every approach that I've taken, looking at fabrics, looking at use, looking at the movement of vessels, it's all about ways that we would interrogate ceramics. And I like that in doing that, I've offered some new insights. If people can do similar things with other forms of material culture that we find associated with the cremation rite, then we might reveal further surprising and new insights.

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Historiography and Archaeology, the *Adventus Saxonum*, and the Politics of the Early Middle Ages

James M. Harland

In Memoriam Stefan Donecker. Ein unvergleichlich scharfsinniger Genosse.

In this interview, the editors and the interviewee discuss contemporary approaches to the study of ethnic identity in the context of the end of Roman Britain and migration to Britain from across the North Sea. A discussion of the interviewee's attempt to problematise this issue in relation to the cremation cemetery of Spong Hill, Norfolk, is used to open up a wider discussion, which covers issues such as issues of empiricism and interpretation, misconceptions about what it means to correctly draw upon archaeological and historical source material in unison, and the mis/utilisation of the study of the early medieval past in its various forms in relation to contemporary political discourse in Britain around issues such as migration, ethnicity and identity.

Ethnic identity; Spong Hill; historiography; politics and archaeology; adventus Saxonum

Introduction

Femke Lippok: The first question is, could you introduce yourself and your work relating to early medieval cremation burials in the context of your other work?

James Harland: I would begin up front by saying that I'm very much not a cremation burial specialist, I would hesitate also to describe myself as an archaeologist. I am, first and foremost, a historian who is interested in the transition from late Roman Britain to post-Roman Britain and how that process affects the transformation of cultural and ethnic identity. My work to date has been mostly concerned with how archaeologists and historians in the present day, have attempted to study that set of processes. So, what were their methodological queries? What were their interpretative assumptions, both conscious and unconscious, and what were the forms of evidence they draw on? What questions do they pose to the archaeological material? That's what my recent book (Harland 2021) was all about. Cremation fits into that because a new form of cremation burial is among the key pieces of evidence for this period of transition and is one of the core pieces of evidence drawn upon by people to assert as evidence for large-scale migration from northern Germany and Scandinavia. Spong Hill, in particular, evidences a distinct form

of cremation urn that otherwise appeared mainly in southern Jutland, which has been used to study questions about the role of migration from that region and the effect it had on the late-to-post-Roman transition for as long as that link has been recognised. My interest in cremation lay in its study by other archaeologists in order to answer these questions. Beyond that, in terms of the empirical study of the material, the understanding of its typology, the sorts of things that we can infer from the items buried with the deceased, I am entirely reliant upon the expertise of other specialists. I have not performed that kind of work myself, though my book does try to show that we can use that empirical work to try and answer different questions. In that, I've actually been immensely helped by Femke's work (Lippok 2020), because it addresses the problematic perceived divide in scholarship between cremation and furnished inhumation (see also Perry, this volume). As you show, we need to treat them together as a set of related practices. And that's especially important when interpretations of Germanic mass migration or Germanic ethnicity narratives hinge upon particular interpretations relating to furnished inhumation. If cremations, as you argue, Femke, have much more to do with inhumations, perhaps new narratives around inhumation which reject those interpretations (e.g. Halsall 1995; 2010, see below) can be extended to cremation. Your work helped me immensely in trying to make a case for that in my book.

Reinterpreting cremation

FL: Which site in your research area featuring cremation burials deserves more attention and why?

JH: I'm going to answer this somewhat counterintuitively. Because I'm going to answer this with Spong Hill, which is possibly the most studied early medieval cremation cemetery in eastern Britain (Hills 1977; Hills and Lucy 2013). It's a relatively famous site in Norfolk, and consists of several thousand cremation urns. It's been known since the early eighteenth century and there have been repeated campaigns of excavation. It has been the foundation of the careers of many early Anglo-Saxon archaeologists with whom we are all incredibly familiar. This might sound like an odd suggestion, given, as other interviewees have pointed out, that it's a site that almost produces a tunnel vision for our interpretative options (see Squires, this volume). Nevertheless, it is a site that deserves further attention for a reason. I would posit that this relates to our framing of questions with regard to this period and how we approach the framing of those questions, which is that much of the debate about the *adventus Saxonum* and how we approach our material, in my view, has been framed too much within a set of binary polarities between either continuity or collapse, mass migration, or absence of migration or trade, or what have

you. Sites like Spong Hill have been the sites around which these questions have been framed. The precise problem I've just been alluding to connects to the importance of seeing inhumation and cremation in dialectic with each other as technologies of remembrance is something that you, Howard, have addressed quite extensively in relation to Spong Hill (Williams 2014), not least given how, as you have highlighted, approaches to this issue with regard to sites like Spong Hill has also been driven by earlier scholarly approaches to furnished inhumation burial (Williams 2014: 101–106).

Many publications about Spong Hill, including those by the main scholars involved in its excavation, frame their questioning around the scale of migration from northern Germany in East Anglia, as if this were the major issue that still requires addressing (e.g. Hills 2014a). When we (and they) look at such cemeteries, we do see that it is impossible to dispute, at least in these regions, some significant scale of migration. We know that lots of people came from northern Germany. OK, good, the question is answered. But I'm not convinced that this is a question that needs answering. If I'm honest, I don't think that anyone could reasonably dispute that migration took place. It is pretty clear that a large body of people moved from northern Germany and Scandinavia in the fifth and sixth centuries (and though there's much else in Gretzinger *et al.* 2022 to be debated, on which see below, this comes out in that publication quite clearly). This is actually where I depart from a body of thinking which seeks to downplay that phenomenon as an explanatory factor in the changes we see in Britain in this period (see e.g. Arnold 1984; Hodges 1989). Susan Oosthuizen's recent book (2019) is a good example of this, because I think that it posed a lot of useful questions in many ways about our interpretative approaches to material questions about how we identify ethnic identity from the material record, which is my main concern. But it too, at least sometimes, follows a broader trend towards binary polarity whereby the key question seems to be regarded as the relative presence or absence of migration, and whether that was the cause of the large set of changes, the shift in orientation and identity that we witness in eastern Britain. This is not about apportioning blame, but this suggests that we are stuck within a set of frameworks that don't help us. And because this sort of framing is unhelpful, we become caught in solutions that also can't get us out of this set of binary polarities; and those solutions are usually empirical. You constantly see it claimed, for example, that more evidence is what will answer our question about whether this migration was the cause of this change in identity orientation from Romano-British or Roman (or whatever), towards what you often see described as a 'Germanic' ideology in publication. I think that is unhelpful. Which is where my work comes in.

The reliance on what we understand about our ability to infer ethnic identity from material culture in this period, and the answer, frankly, is that we know very little.

So, there is an enormous body of literature dedicated to examining this set of questions, but it very rarely pauses to query their legitimacy, and I'm kind of caricaturing here, since there are people who have paused to ask these sorts of questions. But so much of the literature examining these questions to date operates on the assumption that there is this thing called 'Germanic' identity that exists out there in the world, that we can isolate through the material, and the question is just which particular bodies of material we can demonstrate it from, and through which it is constructed in opposition to Roman-ness. However, advances in our understanding of the ethnographic literature of the late Roman world which describes these people, or at least putatively describes these people has posed a serious challenge to our ability to identify some kind of coherent Germanic identity that existed in the late Roman world. We have no idea whether such a thing existed (on this point see the contributions in Friedrich and Harland (eds.) 2021). I'm personally convinced it didn't.

There are also major barriers purely in terms of what we can demonstrate from material culture. We can advance hypotheses. Toby Martin's study on the cruciform brooch (2015) is a fine example, as I think it's a wonderful body of work. It's an important typology, but I don't agree with the arguments Martin advances about the apogee of late fifth/early sixth-century cruciform brooches and the appearance of Style I having something to do with the emergence of an Anglian ethnic identity. Martin's work here represents a particularly sophisticated development of a broader set of ideas which became quite popular in the 2000s, namely that what has to date been called 'Anglo-Saxon' ethnic identity in Britain was situationally constructed through material culture. You see this idea diffused across a wide body of literature from that period (e.g. Ravn 2003; Hakenbeck 2007; Hines 2013). But what I argued in the book is that it is, ultimately, purely an interpretative leap. We have no empirical way of demonstrating that such a thing occurred, especially, not least because we don't have any literature that confirms that there was any kind of Anglian identity like this in circulation with any real purchase in that period. You can try to argue for a back projection for its existence via complicated linguistic analysis, such as we see from scholars like John Hines (e.g. 1984; 1994), but that's about the extent of what's possible, and it's very open to dispute (see, e.g., the critiques of this in Harland 2021: 117–125). My work has been concerned with saying: 'look all of these things that we think we can demonstrate from this material, maybe we actually can't.' Which isn't to say that the idea that these processes are taking place is impossible. But let's just suppose, for a moment, that all of these are things we

can't know. Let's just put those questions to one side, and see what happens if we try asking different questions of some of the evidence that is available to us. Does that make sense?

FL: I completely recognise this! What really struck me when reading about early medieval cremations as a student was that some scholars have this tendency to put graves in boxes according to a set of characteristics. And then stick one homogenous explanation on that box: ethnicity, religion or status. And if you encounter a grave that doesn't fit these categories, it's somewhere in between; it must be a hybrid, and there must have been intermarriage or other forms of contact between these groups. We see this in early twentieth-century publications and it somehow hasn't changed. It's almost created this rift where younger scholars can't be bothered because all answers are seemingly given; you just need to fill it in between the set of given parameters. It's this huge thing that doesn't go away because plenty of people still, even though this has been disputed so many times, frequently fall back on those old explanations.

JH: The typological impulse is really interesting because, and to take it back specifically to Spong Hill, one of the things that's quite interesting in the very final publication of the cemetery (Hills and Lucy 2013), is that there's almost this constant tension in the volume. Because my work was really about analysing the kinds of literary and rhetorical movements that this kind of writing perform rather than analysing its methodology in terms of, 'is the typology correct?' I operate on the assumption that all of the typological arguments are sound and correct, because I don't have the expertise to challenge those. But with respect to the literary analysis of the interpretations advanced from this, there's a tension in the volume. The tension lies in the authors constantly taking pains to suggest that ethnic identity is a fluid situational construct, and that Germanic identity was not this stable thing that we can demonstrate in a person's bones or genes [or so on]. But, the categories into which the volume is constantly trying to place artefact types (and by implication the cultures and peoples which they represent) are always some sort of a hybrid mishmash, of things that are sort of Roman, are sort of Germanic, or something in between. There is never a querying of that framing of the two categories which make up this hybridity in the first place (on this point see also Effros 2015).

In a recent review of my book, Hills (2023) has disputed this, suggesting a concern with issues such as migration and ethnicity 'characterise[s] [my] own text more than [theirs],' suggesting instead that it is public perception which forces scholars to engage with questions that are otherwise not their primary concern. I'm not convinced that this is a fair claim. To give one example, in 2014, Hills framed the ongoing debate in the field as follows:

The key question is the extent to which there was migration by Germanic people from northern Europe to Britain, and whether that took place on such a scale that the migrants replaced the native British population in what became England. (Hills 2014a: 34)

These are not the sorts of words one uses if they are referring to a public concern that would otherwise be of little interest to scholars. This is currently the basic premise in relation to which current scholarship is framed. It's not just an issue driven by the interests of the general public.

An example of why this discursive framing creates problems can be found in that the same review, which objects to a section of the book where I suggest that isotopic evidence at Berinsfield for a lack of an intrinsic tie between being a migrant and using 'Germanic' material culture suggests we should challenge the meanings signalled by such culture (Harland 2021: 178–179). Hills highlights the possibility that such material culture could, of course, be used by the children of migrants (Hills 2023: 327). That's perfectly possible, of course, but I was responding to suggestions that isotopic evidence for a local upbringing coupled with the use of 'Germanic' material culture is indicative of acculturation to ethnicity. My point was not about confirming this in the positive or the negative, but rather to point out that answering such questions in either the positive or the negative is impossible. If ethnic identity is situational and constructed, we should assume neither an intrinsic link *nor indeed an intrinsic lack thereof* between the local upbringing of the person and their identity. And we also should not assume that its association with material culture demonstrates this either.

That's why I think we should return to Spong Hill, to get beyond asking such questions, and instead look at the kinds of questions people like Williams or Effros or Halsall ask, about the complex interrelation of mortuary symbolism and ritual with broader cosmological questions (e.g. Halsall 1995; 2010; Effros 2003; Williams 2006; 2014; Squires, 2012; 2013; Squires, this volume).

Historical contexts and perspectives on early medieval ethnicity

FL: So, coming at this from a different perspective than full-blooded archaeologists, what historical sources have played a role in the interpretation of cremation burials in your area?

JH: Well, it's Bede, isn't it? There's this monk writing in Monkwearmouth Jarrow in the early eighth century, who tells us in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (I.15–16, ed. Colgrave and Mynors 1969) that the Saxons migrate in three tribes: the Angles, Saxons and the Jutes. He contradicts himself later and throws a whole other bunch of tribal names in there (*Historia Ecclesiastica* V.9),

but ultimately, that is rarely seen to matter. This is what he tells us. He tells us (as far as scholars have long been concerned) that the Angles came from Angeln, that the Saxons came from what is now Niedersachsen in northern Germany. This was very useful for the archaeologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, because it gave them a clear set of typological boxes and a set of links to categories with which they could construct seemingly clear cultural zones with their artefacts. Bede offered a very obvious, overarching interpretative framework for scholars like Wylie and Kemble and Charles Roach Smith and so on, which is something Williams (e.g. Williams 2007; 2008) and others (e.g. Lucy, 1998; 2000; Ellard 2019) have written a great deal on.

The difficulty with historians in Bede's day, of course, is that they had very different rhetorical goals to modern scholars. Bede was not writing a history of the English people in order to demonstrate culture-historical, archaeological movement patterns. He was interested in demonstrating the history of the English as a people who are bound to divine Christian history in the process of their conversion. And in doing that, he was also drawing upon rhetorical and literary tropes derived from Gildas (*De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, ed. Mommsen 1898), from whom he basically directly copied and then turned on his head. In that, he was drawing upon late Roman assumptions about barbarian peoples, which believed them to be organised into these clear distinct groups. But these boxes don't necessarily fit what we can know about the reality of the people who lived beyond the Rhine frontier. We're drawing upon an imperialist, colonisers' framework of descriptions for what people in society beyond the Rhine looked like (on that framework see e.g. Halsall 2007: 35–61). But we have very little way of knowing whether or not it matched the reality on the ground of what those people were like in the ancient world. I very rarely trust what a nineteenth-century Victorian colonisers' depiction of what contemporary society in Western Africa looked like, so why should we trust an eighth-century Northumbrian, drawing upon Roman colonial frameworks, when he describes what society looked like 300 years before the date at which he was writing?

Howard Williams: So, what you're saying is that your cynicism towards what we can infer from the archaeological record is not contradicted by a glowing acceptance of the historical record. It's that these are an amalgam, that they have fed off each other, and you're critical of both.

JH: I appreciate you saying that, actually, because I have encountered responses to this kind of commentary before, where people have said: 'are you denying the power of archaeology to explain this material?' No, on the contrary. It is absolutely not about denying the analytical power of

archaeology. It is about opposing the notion that, in order to give archaeology the power to explain, we have to directly import a set of historiographical assumptions that are actually a very poor reading of the historical evidence, and take that the historical evidence at its own word.

HW: I don't think a lot of people get that, and I want to make sure that this isn't overlooked.

FL: We all know that there's been so much criticism of this old paradigm, yet as we've spoken about already, it continues to be rehearsed and adhered to by so many people, and so the question is: how do you explain why this is still a thing in early medieval archaeology. The follow up question would be: are the alternative explanations not accessible or too difficult? Why are people not jumping on these new clearer, better explanations?

JH: This is really a question about the dominance of ethnic paradigms in society more widely. I'm not a sociologist, and I do not claim expertise there, but my answer would be: because these kinds of paradigms are dominant in society. We operate on the default assumption that ethnic groups are organised in these very straightforward, simplistic ways. This is what sociologists like Andreas Wimmer (2013) or Rogers Brubaker (2004) identify and analyse as a serious problem in sociological scholarship, and although they conflict with the Brubakerian approach in other ways, Critical Race Theorists would also agree that this analytical approach is untenable – race and ethnicity are historically contingent phenomena. We've long since, in history and archaeology and anthropology and sociology, come to the conclusion that ethnic identity is a situational construct. Fine, whether the general public has caught up with that question is another matter. You would hope so, given that this has been a paradigm for fifty years now. But you can hardly blame the public for not quite having caught up, because even in academia this constructivist turn is usually quite inconsistent in its application. That's what Rogers Brubaker highlights in his book, *Ethnicity without Groups* (2004). He identifies the presence of this constant reflex towards trying to analyse 'ethnicities', as a default category. Ethnicity, at least as far as he's concerned, is processual. It's a sort of set of motions and identifications that is always about a kind of constant categorisation. It's a process. It's never a fixed state. Similar points are made across much of the *oeuvre* of Critical Race theorists and their precursors (see e.g. Hall, ed. Morley, 2019). The implication of that is that the things which people try and identify as representing a consistent ethnic group don't always necessarily align with what those who had placed themselves and others within the group actually manifest as in practice. So, the classic example Michael Moerman's studies of the Lue in Thailand in the 1960s (Moerman 1968). He surveyed members of that

group on the characteristics that made one 'Lue', and, found that the stated characteristics of particular members were frequently contradictory, no consistent set of criteria could be found. That might be an extreme example but it's one that demonstrated an important point about taking emic assumptions about the characteristics that make up a given identity at face value. We've accepted that theoretically. The point which Brubaker makes is that we all too often still assume that the ethnic group is the primary framework of questioning that we should apply to our evidence. He uses the example of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s: a horrific civil war, Bosnian Serbs and Croats at loggerheads, awful genocidal activities committed by Serbia against Bosnians, especially. There was a base assumption in commentators' analysis that they'd been killing each other simply because they were Bosnian, Serbs or Croats. That was never queried, and that was partly never queried because there were nationalist political parties in whose interest it was to say: 'this is the reason we are killing each other'. But when Brubaker went and performed ethnographic research in discussion with the individual people participating in this violence, they would respond that they'd been doing it for a whole host of complex reasons. Why does anybody fight in a war? You'll find the same range of complex explanations. So, we are mistaking one particular opinion which has been offered by certain members of our subject of study for a representative explanation, and that is a poor thing to do as a social scientist, to take one such opinion and then frame it as the explanation for the phenomenon you're studying. But we do it because it's easy. It's 'common sense': that's my short answer. There is over 200 years of ideologically established common sense that tells us: this is how human beings are organised. And we, therefore, find it very difficult to break out of that set of frameworks. Even when we're trying very hard to, and I'm just as guilty of this as anybody else.

FL: What can we do better? What can we do differently? Because what you're saying suggests that we need to change the framework of our whole approach to both past and present?

JH: That would be my answer, yes, but that's easier said than done. I'm a firmly committed anti-nationalist. Nationalism and the sort of horror it can produce frightens me a great deal. It stems from deep societal roots. Nation-states are often very interested in bolstering nationalist frameworks, because this helps them achieve very useful things in terms of their division and organisation of populations. And I agree that this poses difficulties for historians and archaeologists. We can try and pose counter-narratives, but until you dismantle these frameworks at a more structural, societal level, you'll always struggle to overcome this.

Alternative narratives for cremation

HW: In terms of answering the section of the question about: what is the alternative? Are the alternative narratives more difficult?

JH: At face value: no, you can say things like... I suppose there's very popular examples, such as the importation of jeans or Coca Cola bottles from the United States of America to Japan. Nobody assumes that there was a mass migration of people from America as a consequence of the appearance of jeans in Europe or Japan, right? Equally, there's no assumption that there was a mass migration of Japanese people to the United States because of the increasing popularity of the Toyota car. That kind of analogy oversimplifies things, though, because we now live in a very different world, where commercial capitalism and the consequent interconnectivity of the global economy produce very different mechanisms of economic exchange, so you can brush away the explanation that way. Nevertheless, that kind of analogical reasoning prompts the opportunity to recognise: 'okay, maybe, the relationship between migration and identity is complicated, and requires a more complex consideration of the specific processes related to how this functions in a given instance', rather than accepting what we unthinkingly see as a common sense explanation.

FL: In an effort not to use ethnic labels in labelling cremations, some scholars (like Wamers 2015) use geographical terms to indicate where they think the cremation practice originated. Do you think these changes in terminology are helpful, or do they just obscure what is, in fact, a similar logic to ethnic thinking: that burial practices are geographically bound?

JH: On the face of it, a simple replacement of terminology doesn't have to mean that. But the question then becomes, what do you do with this change in terminology? And this is where I'll take the opportunity to comment on a broader set of conversations that are taking place in the field right now. Changing terminology, though important, is no substitute for a change in epistemic assumptions. Because if you just say, 'they're not Germanic people, they're northern people', the focus is still on assuming a material culture's users are paying homage to their own origins. We still make the same set of assumptions about what we can infer from this material. You're not escaping from the same kind of interpretative assumptions and therefore we're stuck in the same paradigmatic argument.

First of all, if this is material that has links to 'the North,' that's all that we can say about it. Returning to the example of our evidence from East Anglia, it is probably fair to say that at some point, migration played a role in the set of processes that produced those links to 'the North'

(or, to be more precise, the North Sea). That is very difficult to dispute on the basis of the sheer amount of that material alone, when read alongside the other source materials we have that are written about these events. We know that there was a migration of people from this region, so fine. But that's about the extent of what we can say. Going purely from the material on its own, on the face of it, the rest of it, about ethnicity, identity, whatever, is a set of interpretative assumptions. It's a set of interpretative leaps. All we really have, is a stylistic link between some types of material and others alongside awareness that some movement (indeed of sometimes considerable scale) that took place at some point. That's all we can say. We can then begin to advance interpretations, but they don't have to be the ones you've just proposed. They could be something else.

My answer then would be that the very making of that point is important, specifically, that there is a whole other set of processes by which these links could have possibly emerged. And that enables us to get out of the trap of assuming that the only option available to us for interpretation is to assume that these people were constructing coherent cultural identities, which produces historical narratives which could then underpin those more frightening nationalist projects.

FL: So, for example, in England, for East Anglia, I'm not saying that migration didn't happen, but I'm thinking of the framework of Loveluck and Tys (2006), who talk about a North Sea cultural region where lots of things were continuously exchanged. So, do we have to think of it as one migration event, or is it a continuous migration and exchange of stuff and people?

JH: This is a key point: migration across the North Sea was always in some way continuous in pre-modern Britain, in prehistoric Britain, in Roman Britain and then post-Roman Britain. The question is not (and this is where I've departed from other sets of interpretations) 'did a migration occur?' The question is, why did this particular moment of migration produce, or at least coincide, with a major change in cultural identification? And that's where I think that turning to the narrative of Gildas and Bede does actually give us insight. But not in the simplistic sense that 'Saxons migrated and they conquered everything'. More, that there were clearly people involved in those movements across the North Sea that had something to offer as a form of political allegiance outside of the traditional civic Roman model of identification. Because people who identified with the civic Roman norm of identification identified those people as in some way deviant from legitimate Romanness. Whether those people would have agreed, I don't know. The cultural transformation this led to would have been a continuous process over several hundred years, but I do certainly think (and I'd be silly

not to) that at some point, some soldiers from northern Germany showed up in Britain at the invite of the British authorities and some of them probably did so, as Gildas says, to fight off Pictish and Irish raiders. But this is really no different than the Empire's many other examples of the recruitment of barbarians. Before the fifth century, many such barbarian recruits would have become integrated into imperial society. Something like this set of events must have happened. But connections between Roman Britain and *northern barbaricum* had already long existed. So, alright, that migration can in some way be tied to a change in cultural identification and orientation. But this was a long-term process rather than a single migration event or act of invasion. It wasn't like these marvellous nineteenth-century paintings of Hengist and Horsa washing up on the shore and leading an army. I'm convinced that the people that the late Roman authorities called 'Saxons' would have thought of themselves as Roman soldiers. I am utterly convinced that that's how they would have thought of themselves, and have offered reasons to believe this in print, not least because this would well resemble what we see in other post-Roman 'barbarian' successor states in this period (Harland 2017; 2021). But you can't prove this in any directly straightforward way through reference to the material culture. All one can do is note that all of these phenomena (militarisation, migration, the use of material culture drawing upon late Roman military motifs but with direct ties to the world across the North Sea, and so on) coincide with one another. After this, our argument becomes about offering narrative interpretation of what those intersecting phenomena mean, which is what historians and archaeologists ultimately do. Let's take the example of Spong 'Man' (or 'person'), a rather famous cremation urn lid from Spong Hill (Figure 13.1). This is one of only very few figural representations of a person, which we have from a post-Roman funerary context in Britain, and Hills (2014b) has persuasively shown it to have an early fifth-century context. Scholars frequently suggest that the hat the figure is wearing resembles a Pannonian cap (Walton Rogers 2007: 209; Brandenburgh 2013: 45; Hills 2014b). This was an item of military costume which we find across the entire late Roman world (e.g. Figures 13.2 and 13.3), and indeed might have made it into the Saxon homelands too (Brandenburgh 2013). It's noteworthy, then, that although Spong Man was not found with its pot, Hills (2014b: 82) has highlighted that urns which are a likely candidate for its type had a slight preponderance toward burials of adult men, buried with grave-goods, especially miniatures and combs. At the same time as Spong Man was likely buried, something else very interesting was going on. Namely, the widespread adoption of a form of costume which uses idealised, constructed 'barbarian' aesthetics (on this see especially



Figure 13.1: 'Spong Man', with Pannonian cap, early fifth century (Reproduced by permission of Norwich Castle Museum)

von Rummel 2007; 2013), what Halsall (2007: 110) calls 'barbarian chic'. What we understand to be 'barbarian' costume is inseparable from that trend, and we know that late Roman military styles which evidence this trend had an enormous influence on the early art styles which developed in northern Germany and Scandinavia, and from which the material culture which migrated to Britain descends (see e.g. Haseloff 1973; 1981). Meanwhile, there are known instances where active ethnonationalist suppression of those provincial Roman roots took place in scholarship, in order to bolster the putatively 'Germanic' roots of such material culture (see Fehr 2001: 334–336 on the forced suppression of provincial Roman stylistic roots at Thorsberger Moor in Joachim Werner's Habilitation thesis). This, of course, was precisely the same intellectual context in which many of the stylistic arguments for the putative 'Germanicness' of such metalwork emerged. (Friedrich 2022, chapter 1 offers a rigorous and detailed overview of this and a critique of the failure to overcome it). Given all of these points, might it not make more sense to just see what we can actually prove in the material culture from Spong Hill? Maybe the participants in the funerary ceremony of Spong Hill depicted their dead in Roman military garb because this was a primary point of reference for how they conceived their own self-rep-



Figure 13.2: Soldiers arresting St Peter, dressed in a late antique military uniform including a Pannonian cap, Sarcophagus from Astorga, c. 310 CE, in the Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid (Photograph by J.M. Harland)

resentation, regardless of where they came from – the possible, indeed likely, origin of the framework of ideas which Spong Man references in northern Germany doesn't refute this possibility. That's an interpretative leap too, but it's one you can just as well advance from the available evidence, without needing any recourse to 'Germanic' identity.

The politics of archaeology today

FL: Another interesting point that you very strongly argue about is the mutual influence of nationalism and early medieval archaeology and the role of ethnicities in this. Do you have examples of those nationalistic movements citing early medieval archaeology or history for their legitimacy? How real is this threat, and what should we, as early medieval scholars, historians or archaeologists, do about it?

JH: The most obvious example, I suppose, would be the Nazis. Under the Third Reich, the Ahnenerbe were involved in a great deal of energetic excavation as a result of (among other things) Heinrich Himmler's support for notions of the Germanic occult (on this, see Arnold 2008; Wood 2013).

If I wanted to offer a more recent British example, there's a rather frightening far-right web forum that's been around for years dedicated to white supremacist



Figure 13.3: Portrait of the Four Tetrarchs, c. 300 CE, originally from the so-called "Philadelphion" in Constantinople. Today St. Mark's Square, Venice (Photograph by Dennis Jarvis, distributed under a CC-BY-SA-2.0 License)

'Anglo-Saxon' or (as they put it) 'Englisc' ethnonationalism. There's a rather well-known article that came out in *Nature* a few years back (Leslie *et al.* 2015) which used analyses of modern genetic haplotypes to study the scale of what it called 'Anglo-Saxon' migration. Just a few days later, members of the aforementioned white supremacist web forum wheeled out the *Daily Telegraph's* interpretation of that particular study (Knapton 2015) to say, 'well, look, we've proven that British people still lived in pre-modern tribal kingdoms on the basis of their DNA and this justifies our belief that we are English or we are Anglo-Saxons, and we can therefore claim a form of racial superiority now proven through our genes'. So that's actually where most of this is now beginning to turn to: DNA evidence more than material cultural evidence. Mainly because the material cultural debates, despite all of the things I've just been complaining about, have by and large rejected that set of narratives, whereas DNA currently, inadvertently, risks offering a reassertion of the older culture-historical racialist models, which is

something that Susanne Hakenbeck (2019) has recently demonstrated in detail (see also Parmenter 2024).

One example of the importance of addressing this problem might be found in a very famous study from last year (Gretzinger *et al.* 2022). It's also a very important study, not least in that it reveals several very interesting things, such as a confirmation that, when seen across the *longue durée*, on the scale of centuries, people were indeed moving quite a lot. For what it's worth, it's a sign of the lack of conceptual clarity of the discipline that those of us who dispute ethnic interpretations are frequently accused of denying this. Also, quite importantly, the study shows that those who possess ancestry relating to those involved in that movement were statistically more likely to be buried with grave-goods (Gretzinger *et al.* 2022: supplementary note 7). Especially brooches and bracteates. Now this is important, it's the sort of thing which, if one wanted to, one could use to argue in favour of Martin's or Hines' arguments about material culture and constructed ethnicity. What it doesn't do, though, is prove the existence of some form of pan-Germanic consciousness upon which such arguments rely. We still have to make interpretative decisions, and weigh up aspects of arguments for and against such proposals, and recognise that these are interpretative propositions, still not yet empirically proven: to throw out a quick counter-proposal, for example, perhaps women with what the authors call 'Continental Northern Ancestry' were more likely to be buried with grave goods because women with such ancestry could have more often had marriage ties to post-Roman potentates (precisely because of the aforementioned mobility, which very much happened), rendering them more likely to occupy positions of status and thereby more likely to prompt social crises upon their death. That's an interpretation that would accord perfectly well with alternative schools of thought on furnished inhumation I've referred to above (such as those of Halsall 2005; 2010), and also takes into account what this evidence shows us. It's an interpretative leap, but it's one in which it's just as possible to advance from the available evidence.

But that's not how this evidence and other bodies of DNA evidence are presently being used in wider public discourse. These are instead being taken as hard proof, in some circles, for the older narratives of mass migration, invasion, conquest, in ways that interestingly actually directly contradict some of the proposals made by Gretzinger *et al.* 2022's authors. To give one example, at the start of June, the Daily Telegraph published a typical Culture Wars-esque piece alleging that the University of Cambridge is attempting to rewrite history by highlighting that the Anglo-Saxons were never a single, 'distinct ethnic group' (Simpson 2023). *The Telegraph's* tweet first promoting this story, which has over a million views at time of writing, received considerable interaction from

accounts which appear to be coming from a far-right perspective. Some wielded modern DNA test results (with varying degrees of historical comprehension; for other references, see Leslie *et al.* 2015). Mere days after Gretzinger *et al.* 2022's publication, a video summarising and analysing the paper was uploaded by one far-right YouTube creator (which I refuse to cite directly on ethical grounds). The antifascist and antiracist Charitable Trust, *Hope not Hate* have documented this creator's presence at major far-right political meetings (Mulhall 2019; Hope Not Hate 2019). This video, which at the date of going to print has over 45,000 views, states that Gretzinger *et al.* 'reveals [anti-racist] scholars to be the charlatans that they are', and likewise claims that the study 'shows that Germanic people are coming into places and they're not just integrating, they're retaining their, you know, Nordic burial practices.' Notice already how many steps removed this interpretation is from what Gretzinger *et al.* actually say. 'Continental Northern Ancestry' is directly conflated with 'Germanic' (or here, 'Nordic') ancestry. North Sea material culture and its use is immediately interpreted as evidence for a lack of integration between distinct ethnic groups, which it axiomatically assumes to exist (note that people making these sorts of ill-informed claims rarely talk about the heavy stylistic references this material culture makes to late Roman military styles). This is quite a number of interpretative steps removed from what the material culture and its relation with the DNA directly empirically proves, but it's important to highlight that far-right activists are using this material to claim that their own arguments are now empirically proven. These are the media in which many people are consuming these studies, not in their scholarly form, often in ways that, to be clear, those publishing their scholarly form are alarmed and appalled by.

HW: Is this a mash-up of 2020s aDNA and modern DNA and 1920s/1930s historians, which has nothing to do with archaeological scholarship whatsoever?

JH: I want to say yes, and no. Obviously, we will as scholars always be reproducing the normative values, paradigms and assumptions of our world. In that sense, we are inevitably reproducing societal structures that are racist and divisive and are harmful, even if we have, on paper, moved on from the historical narratives developed in the early twentieth century. We do have a duty to be constantly querying our own assumptions and trying to challenge where they might be reproducing those structures. It is only if we successfully manage that, and get our own house in order (and that's an ongoing task) that we can say to people making such interpretations of those aDNA studies, 'the study of this material does not justify your worldview'. On the other hand, I do think that you are correct to say that

a good many of the people who are explicitly weaponising and wielding this are often not interested in the reality of what the source materials say. I'm actually very interested in Umberto Eco's writing on ur-Fascism (1995). He mainly notes that fascists are more interested in the notion of constructing your own reality and base of power through force of will, which in some way means the reality of the evidence is actually immaterial, because you construct your own reality, you assert yourself upon reality. But this means that contradictory pieces of evidence are immaterial to fascists. They just take whatever they can and they hammer it together into a narrative that suits them. That said, this broader embedding of ethnic assumptions in the paradigms with which we construct society is very much there. And although that itself is not an assertion of fascist ideology, it provides a sort of surface, upon which that can manifest itself.

FL: Our prime minister Mark Rutte in the Netherlands, made an analogy in the *Financial Times* between modern migration from the Middle East and Central Asia and the Roman Empire's external threats from barbarians (Spiegel 2015). He has a background as an historian, and nobody even blinked an eye at him saying this!

JH: I'm very partisan regarding the end of the Roman Empire and its particular utilisation for political argument in that respect. For me, that example just underlines the importance of detaching the past from the present, in the sense that the past has no power over the present. What power it may have over the present lies solely in people's utilisation of it. There is nothing inherently powerful in particular narratives which assert the role of barbarian mass migration in the destruction of the Roman Empire. These could theoretically be 100% correct (though I don't think they are), and that would have no ramifications whatsoever for the ethical implications of handling migration today, because simply pointing out the occurrence of such events is not an ethical argument. Reality is always more complex than such narratives try to suggest, and our ethical obligations in terms of helping refugees and being a welcoming, inclusive society are a separate question from what happened millennia ago.

HW: Would you have any opinions then on how our stories – going back to Spong Hill and East Anglian cremation – are one manifestation of a migration narrative or can be read in that way? How should that be communicated to a broader public or kind of inclusive integrating story of burial ritual and community?

JH: Showing that immigration has been a constant of British history is important. But the danger in assuming that the solution is solely about showing whether or not

migration 'happened' is that the moment at which anybody is able to provide evidence for strong demographic continuity, arguments about the importance of 'indigeneity' also become important, and seen, if these are the terms of our debate, as a refutation of that important observation. In a British historical context, that focus on indigeneity is something of a white supremacist dog whistle (it was quite a popular trope for the BNP, for example). So, my concern is that you risk getting trapped in the same frameworks of debate. I want to separate the actual presence or absence of migration in the past from any implications about what modern Britain should look like.

Heritage interpretation and public archaeology for early medieval cremation

HW: What about heritage interpretation for early Anglo-Saxon cremation burials? The Norwich Castle Museum has a great exhibition in which the Spong Hill urns are joined by an image by a contemporary artist represented in an individual of South Asian heritage with the Union flag in order to contextualise the early Anglo-Saxon migrations in relation to the complex story of immigration affecting these isles (Figure 13.4). Specifically, by making an analogy between the sub-Roman period and Britain today, the Spong Hill pots and the story of 'Anglo-Saxon' origins are articulated as one by which indigenous people and newcomers were integrated. Museum curator Dr Tim Pestell has said to me that the image and its connotations has sparked controversy as a result. For me, this reveals how sensitive and significant it is, and the responsibilities we have, when we talk, write and present about the burial evidence from fifth/sixth century in Britain.

JH: I had no idea about this, and that prompts a few thoughts for me. One thing that interests me, actually, is the way that the Saxons are frequently framed as 'colonisers' in most narratives (for a recent example, 'Anglo-Saxon Colonization' is the title of chapter 8 in Rippon 2018), which I think is actually completely wrong-headed, whatever the Saxons were in all of their complex multiplicity. They have been framed that way, firstly, because of Bede, but mainly because of how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars made use of the Bedan narrative in the creation of their own imperial projects – and that terminology became embedded in the basic language we all use to describe this period. I think a more correct understanding, based on the then most contemporary depictions of who the Saxons were, would be that they were subaltern people. They were people who existed on the peripheries of an empire. They were dominated by a colonial power which homogenised their complexity, and which used them as its soldiers. They moved into this collapsing empire in the context



Figure 13.4: Exhibition display at the Norwich Castle Museum showing 'Anglo-Saxon' urns, other artefacts, and the portrait of an individual of South Asian heritage with the Union flag (Photograph by H. Williams)

of their recruitment as soldiers for that Empire, but they were very much a subaltern people. In that sense, their migration to Britain has far more parallels, I would say, with mid-twentieth century, post-imperial migration to Britain than we often think (and it is precisely because people see, or want to see, the Saxons as conquering colonisers, rather than the subaltern colonised subjects that they were, that we miss that parallel). And just to be very clear on this point, that doesn't mean that stories of a 'Saxon' takeover represent what might happen here in a modern contexts, as far-right fantasists believe. The past doesn't predict the future, and then, just as now, migrants to Britain were not a coherent, discrete group with specific, coherent aims.

In that sense, I would say the Norwich exhibition is actually a very apt parallel and it is all the more apt in that it highlights the need to reject the putative power of the past. In this example, a lot of those objections to that museum display which you mentioned are presumably the result of people being outraged at the suggestion that a non-white person could be emblematic of the *adventus Saxonum*. But if one understands that whiteness did not really exist in Late Antiquity (certainly not as it is now

understood), in that whiteness was not a category which was meaningful for people in the late Roman world, there is no reason, if we work with the terms of understanding for the categorisation of peoples that late antique people had, why such a person could any less be treated as representative of that event than not. Moreover, that narrative is valuable because it offers an understanding of and a connection to British history that is more about recognising parallels and relatable patterns than it is about demanding essentialist categories of exclusion.

HW: My point is simply: how do we make these stories involving these urns, these cremation burials, speak, when we have such vociferous reactions?

JH: It's a really good parallel. Maybe I think that because I, like most British millennials, came of age in a period which can be slotted into a post-imperial narrative paradigm. I'm someone who has grown up in the later aftermath of the collapse of the British Empire and I have inherited one notion which developed from that, of a multicultural Britain, with people who migrated in the collapse of that empire being very much part of the fabric

of our society. That's one of several contesting and conflicting political narratives which modern Britons draw upon—indeed, the New Labour-era narrative of multiculturalism that was probably formative for my experiences in childhood was in its own way quite problematic in its assimilationist and essentialising tendencies and has been criticised by scholars on this basis (see e.g. Hall 2000; Back *et al.* 2002). Other narratives, of course, are yet worse, are far more explicitly exclusionary, and white supremacy plays an enormous role, there. There, I can refer to my own example. One side of my own ancestors migrated to Britain in the late nineteenth century. They were German Jews. And yet it's indicative of current prejudices that fewer members of the British public, other than Nazis sympathisers, I think, would object to my face being used in that museum display, than the face of the aforementioned artist (even if she had been born before me and had ancestral ties to Britain at least as old as mine, both of which, without knowing the person in question, are perfectly possible scenarios). Even though I no more possess 'Anglo-Saxon' heritage, as these critics would falsely understand it, than anyone else does. And the roots of that objection serve to demonstrate just how meaningless that entire concept actually is, in reality. So, I guess we need to keep getting across in more public settings that our categories of race, ethnicity and identity are modern categories, that do not directly overlap with how these categories functioned in the past. That can be very liberating, and it gives people who are often denied a place in narratives about the British past greater access to, agency in, and power over those narratives. Scholars need to make the case that the heritage of early medieval Britain no more belongs to one kind of person than it does anyone else. Precisely because those categories don't have intrinsic meaning or salience now. The only meanings they have are those we create. And so, the task is to offer more potent meanings that are inclusive of people who are so often excluded from, but have just as much of a stake in the interpretation of that past.

HW: The scary thing is that you could ask yourself if it would matter. Would it still stop the ur-fascists dominating that narrative with their own spin? The same newspaper articles are written with categories that aren't even mentioned in an exhibition. This is why I feel so 'rabbit in the headlights' after twenty-five years of dealing with this, you can have this horrible feeling that it's utterly futile at one level.

JH: I suppose a lot of it just has to come down to accepting, that individuals, as individuals, are relatively powerless to effect these mass changes. But what we can do is write, and we can publish, and we can disseminate our ideas, and hope that in the long term, more people will read

those ideas and contribute to them and write things themselves. Any kind of paradigm shift in our understanding of complex social forces is a slow long-term process, that requires the gradual transformation of things at the epistemic level. And terminological changes are a part of that. But it's even more vital to gradually chip away at how ideas are constituted, and that's not something one person can achieve. We can't simply flip a switch and expect to see a change. It's a project of decades, right?

FL: So, if it is, as you say, about countering a whole modern conception and sets of values, of course, that is not going to be easy. How do we replace existing, well-known models with new, complex interpretations, when that's perhaps more challenging to convey in the world of rapid social media?

JH: *Are the newer narratives more complex?* The popular perception that the early medieval past was organised into coherent sets of ethnic groups did not emerge innocently, but is actually founded on an incredibly complex set of modern scholarly narratives (see e.g. Geary 2001; Wood 2013; Donecker 2021). Those narratives came into being as part of the impetus toward Romantic nationalism, but today it is widely assumed that these narratives represent some sort of essential truth which wields power over us. This just goes to show: if people are trying to convince you that the past has power over the present, it's usually because they are pushing a particular agenda onto you. But we have the power to interpret the past. We have always had that power.

HW: This is where I disagree with my US and Canadian colleagues who want to constantly combat 'ancient aliens'. It's not that we should concede that ancient aliens are a 'thing' worthy of respect or consideration; it completely denigrates human diversity and creativity and so on. Yet we have a massive science fiction world that synergises with science communication which is a major and powerful engagement mechanism for space exploration, astronomy and astrophysics riddled with colonial tropes but is actually a positive field of popular discourse addressing key questions regarding who we are and where we have come from, and where we are going. While there are fringe and hate groups, most folks who consumed this material are simply fascinated by the big stories of who we are on the grandest scale possible. It's the same with palaeontologists; if all they can do is shout at how Jurassic Park 'got it wrong', then we are missing a trick. The challenge is how we capture this interest and guide it in an informed way.

JH: I guess there are two angles to this: I agree, on the one hand, that we shouldn't just be shouting down

people saying ‘you’re stupid and wrong. Go away.’ On the other hand, one should aim to send signals to groups of people who equally would straightaway recognise their exclusion from this narrative that they are just as welcome to participate in our scholarship and what we’re doing, and that’s important. I guess for me, the way you signal that would be to offer a better narrative in a way that is straightforward and accessible and which can also be shown to be more satisfying. And I think that this exhibition in Norwich Castle Museum with Tim Pestell is actually a really good example of someone attempting to do that, because it’s offering a narrative which says, ‘well, actually, maybe the *adventus Saxonum* more closely resembled post-Imperial migration to Britain in the mid-twentieth century than we think.’ We hear a lot about the complaints it received, but complainants are often louder. I don’t have the figures, but could it well be that for every one person who made a complaint, nine people came away convinced of a slightly better approach to things? I’d be interested to know if that was the case, not least because this is actually a direction of investigation I’ve been interested in for a while. For my next book, I’m thinking about the imperial periphery in the aftermath of the collapse of the Roman Empire as looking much more like current post-colonies, which remain closely bound to their collapsing empires. It’s a far more satisfying narrative, in my view.

HW: Well, I think what you’ve just done there is really important, because what you said went in response to our earlier question is that you have models that people can understand. There may have very different understandings of positive and good about the end of the Roman Empire. You’re not trying to deny migration or counter state collapse. The fifth century was a time of transformation on many scales and characters. Capturing a modern analogue is important. And an analogy does not mean it has to be a direct parallel. It serves to bounce ideas between past and present for various publics. So, I think in museological terms, I think you’ve captured something really powerful there, and these humble pots, which is what we’re talking about, are suddenly placed in the story in a very interesting way, without necessarily buying into those mass migration hypotheses or mass migration denial hypothesis.

JH: Ultimately, any of these narratives will prove, in their broad brushstrokes, dissatisfying, because society is always more complex than the simple narratives we force it into. And that was just as true in the contemporary late Roman world. I’m sure the inhabitants of fifth-century Britain who used these cinerary urns had a whole set of conflicting and competing narratives about how these related to society as they understood it. So why should *our* simple narratives be any better?

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Isotopes and Halls of Marrow:

Investigating the Viking Age Cremations at Heath Wood, Ingleby

Tessi Löffelmann

This chapter focuses on the strontium isotope analysis of cremated remains from the only known Viking cremation cemetery at Heath Wood, Derbyshire (England, UK). It explores published strontium, oxygen, and lead isotope data from Heath Wood and nearby Repton to assess the relationship between the two sites and highlights how indications for mobility (based on strontium isotopes) produced through geo-chemical techniques can be used to untangle relationships and explore questions of identity, agency and animal-human relationships. It argues that mobility is fundamentally about relationships between individuals, things, and the environment and that this is why we can use it to discuss aspects of agency and identity.

Bioarchaeology, strontium, isotopes, Viking, mobility

Introduction

Femke Lippok: Could you introduce yourself and your work relating to early medieval cremation burials in the context of your other work?

Tessi Löffelmann: Originally, I am from Frankfurt am Main in Germany, but I have spent over a third of my life outside of the country. I would definitely say that I very much benefitted from the free movement afforded to students through EU policies. I spent my undergraduate years at the University of Glasgow, where I graduated with a degree in Archaeology and History. From there, I went to Durham University and completed an MSc in Palaeopathology because I wanted to study human remains. I worked for about 2.5 years as a field archaeologist and an osteoarchaeologist before starting my PhD – and now I am a bioarchaeologist and just completed my co-tutelle PhD at Durham University and Vrije Universiteit Brussel. For my thesis, I wanted to explore mobility in the early medieval period, something that I had already worked on for my MSc thesis with Janet Montgomery. I was lucky that just at this time, Christophe Snoeck finished his PhD at Oxford, showing that cremated remains can be used for Sr analysis (2015), and we asked him to co-supervise my project from the VUB side.

I have had the privilege of working with cremated remains from Heath Wood in Derbyshire, the only known Viking-period cremation cemetery in the British Isles (see

also Maldonado, this volume). Cremated bone from some of the excavated mounds has been radiocarbon (^{14}C) dated to the eighth to tenth centuries, which is quite broad but covers a very interesting period in the area. In fact, we need to see Heath Wood as part of a wider landscape which includes nearby Repton and what is now a field at Foremark. Jarman and colleagues have found indications for the presence of the Viking Great Army (or *micel here*) winter camp at the latter location (Jarman 2021), and this corresponds with reports in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the years 873–874 CE, which document the overwintering at Repton. Given that this is a much larger area than the small D-shaped enclosure at Repton's St Wystan's church, which was previously excavated by Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle (2001), it is the more likely candidate for the camp site, and this is also supported by the finds that Jarman recovered here. Foremark is located much closer to Heath Wood than Repton and can be observed from the small hill that features our Viking cremation cemetery.

Apart from studying the remains from Heath Wood, I have worked with slightly earlier cremation deposits from Cleatham in Lincolnshire, one of the largest cremation cemeteries dating to the fifth to seventh centuries (see Squires, this volume), and another small mixed-rite (bi-ritual) cemetery at Ingleby Barwick, Stockton-on-Tees, which dates to the same period and is remarkably far north and so quite intriguing in its own right. I am currently postdoctoral researcher at VUB in Brussels, and I work on a variety of projects.

Background: introducing Heath Wood

Howard Williams: What is the generally accepted explanation for the occurrence of Viking-period cremations in your research area? What's the background of this interpretation?

TL: At Heath Wood, the Viking cremation cemetery I investigated for my PhD project (Figure 14.1), the cremation burials contrast immensely with the burial norms of the period and the area. The site is located near Repton in Derbyshire and consists of fifty-nine mounds, which cover cremation deposits in different forms (*in situ* pyre, token deposits, and possible cenotaphs).

Some of the cremated bone has recently been ^{14}C dated to the eighth to mid-tenth centuries (Richards *et al.* 2004), and at this time, Christianity was well established in Britain. Almost all burials in the region at this point in time followed the same protocol: supine and extended inhumations without grave goods. Given that the cremation burials at Heath Wood date to this period, coupled with the strong Scandinavian character of the funerary rite(s) and the Scandinavian-style grave goods, archaeologists tend to see them as part of the early Viking presence in Britain (see Halsall 2000: 263, 272). We also

have primary source material in the form of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and for the period and area in question, there are relevant reports from which we can extract some information. Crucially, one of the major concerns recorded annually in these documents is the movements of the Viking Great Army, after its arrival in 865 CE in East Anglia (Whitelock *et al.* 1961). Indeed, the nearby Repton was named as the place where the Army set up their winter camp in 873–874 CE: 'In this year the army went from Lindsey [in modern Lincolnshire] to Repton and took up winter quarters there' (Whitelock *et al.* 1961). One explanation for the occurrence of the cremation mounds near Repton has, therefore, always been the connection with the movements of this Army.

This raises the question of why the Army would make its way to Repton in the heart of the English Midlands. We know that around the time of the arrival of the Viking Great Army, Repton was important in the socio-political landscape of the kingdom of Mercia (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1992; Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 2001; Richards *et al.* 2004; Davies 2019; Jarman *et al.* 2019; Hadley and Richards 2021). The presence of a monastery dating to the early seventh century has been established on the basis of records, and we also know from recent archaeological work that there might have been a polyfocal settlement which was long-lived and certainly survived the Viking activity at Repton in some form (Davies 2019). The community residing in Repton when the Great Army arrived was socially stratified and included people of varying status. Notable is also the presence of an early medieval royal child-saint's cult, that of St. Wystan, which resulted in Repton becoming a locus of pilgrims and Mercian royal commemoration. This would have undoubtedly led to increased regional mobility to the area and was almost certainly not restricted to royalty. Word-of-mouth might have travelled even further and reached the Scandinavian incomers, whose strategy included targeting significant locales within the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that after repeated clashes with the Great Army, power over the Mercian kingdom passed to the Scandinavians, and this part of Mercia was integrated into the Danelaw. Certainly, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* also notes the 'sharing-out' of eastern Mercian land in 877 CE (Swanton 2000: 74–75; Richards 2007: 35). King Ceolwulf II of Mercia's death in 879 CE likely sealed the fate of the kingdom. Perhaps most pertinently, we know that after their stay in Repton in 873–874 CE, the Army split up into two groups. One of these settled in Northumbria, the other group moved on to the next phase of conquest. In reference to this, an argument has also been made to suggest that the cremation burials at Heath Wood stem not from the initial phase of Viking Great Army activity but instead, post-date this and belong to a settlement phase around 877 CE (Wainwright 1947; Shetelig 1954: 91;



Figure 14.1: Heath Wood Viking cremation cemetery during plant sampling trip for PhD project in summer 2021 with figure for scale (Photograph by T. Löffelmann)

Graham-Campbell 2001: 110; Jarman 2021: 27). Conversely, one could argue that the split of the Army might be related to the difference in burial ritual practised at St. Wystan in Repton and Heath Wood. There are good arguments for both scenarios, and the discussions will likely continue until further excavations and analyses have been able to generate new information on sequences, dating, etc.

FL: Were the burials at Heath Wood really the remains of a war cemetery, left by the Viking Great Army? And how do they tie in with the furnished inhumations found at the Repton churchyard?

TL: I think it makes sense to first discuss what we know so far about both sites, because they definitely need to be seen as part of the same landscape. The site at St. Wystan's church in Repton was excavated by Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle (1992; 2001) and featured a D-shaped enclosure using the chapel as access point. Inside this enclosure and around the church, an early medieval cemetery was exposed. Around the north-eastern end of the church itself, a small number of inhumation burials were discovered, which contained the skeletons of mostly adult males, some of whom had sustained peri-mortem sharp-force

trauma indicative of sword combat (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1992; Jarman *et al.* 2018). For example, the man in grave 511 had suffered what appears to be sword blade inflicted trauma to the head and left upper thigh (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1992). Furthermore, some of these individuals were adorned with Scandinavian objects, including a Thor's hammer pendant with glass beads, a boar's tusk, a jackdaw humerus, a belt, knives, and a sword (all items were found with the 35+ year old male in grave 511). Other items at Repton included a gold ring and silver pennies from the early 870s (grave 529) and evidence for burials featuring an axe and a spear. The graves have also been described in some detail by Jarman *et al.* (2018).

Further west of the church and the enclosure, the excavators encountered a mass burial below a mound which held the disarticulated remains of c. 264 people, mainly males. A multiple burial was located slightly west and on top of this mound (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1992; Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 2001; Jarman *et al.* 2019). The ¹⁴C dating of a sample of these charnel remains caused some confusion at first and seemed to separate the group into two – one slightly earlier (seventh to eighth centuries), the other later (eighth to tenth). This discrepancy was recently

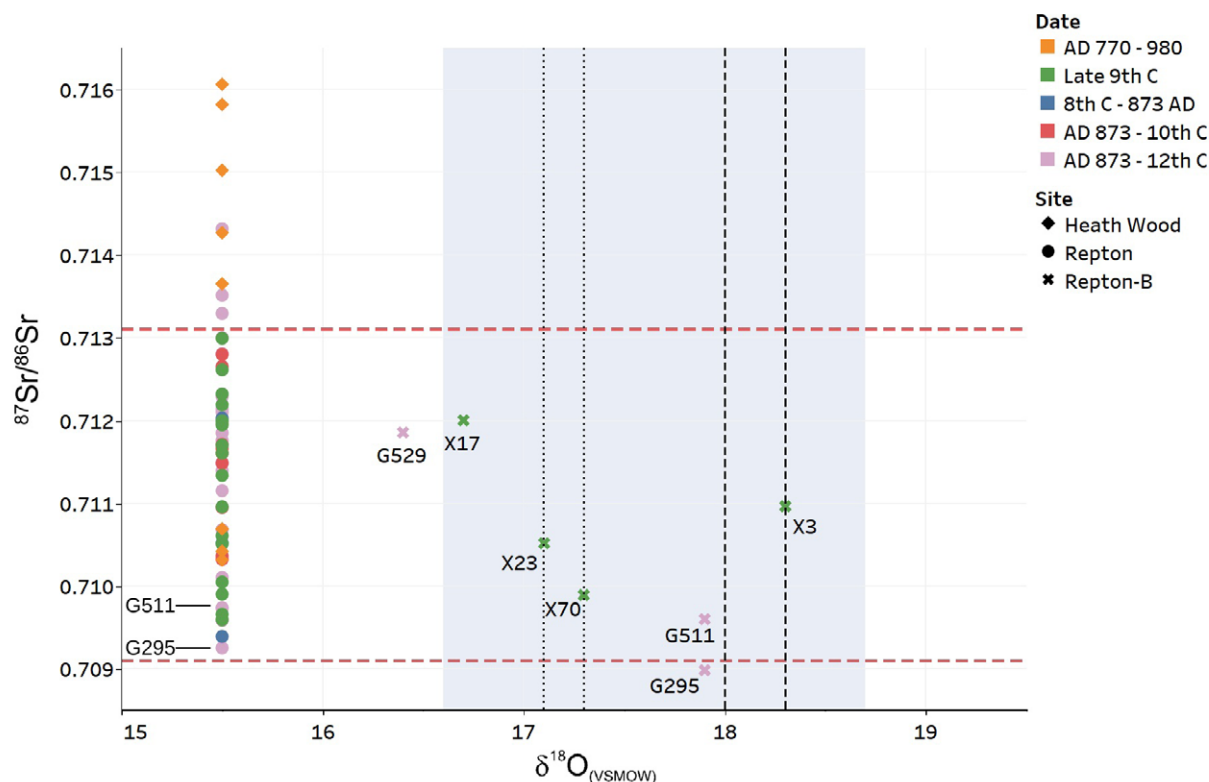


Figure 14.2: $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ of tooth enamel (Repton) from individuals dating to the late ninth century onwards (sorted by colour) plotted against $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{(VSMOW)}}$ where available. The $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ of those individuals where $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{PO4 (VSMOW)}}$ was not available is plotted at 15.5 for comparison. Cremated bone from Heath Wood is included (diamonds). Red horizontal lines indicate BASr based on plant data from 25km catchment; vertical dotted lines indicate 95% CI for eastern areas of Britain (lower rainfall); vertical dashed lines indicate 95% CI for western areas of Britain (higher rainfall); blue band indicates approximate $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{PO4 (VSMOW)}}$ range for Britain based on human enamel data (Evans *et al.* 2012). Repton-B data from Budd *et al.* (2004b); and Evans *et al.* (2012) (see oxygen raw data for information on errors), Repton data from Jarman *et al.* (2019), Heath Wood data from Löffelmann *et al.* (2023)

addressed by Jarman *et al.* (2018), who showed that marine reservoir effects likely caused the difference seen between the two groups. The authors concluded that all burials (charnel, multiple burial, and burials around church) were consistent with a late ninth century date and, therefore, could represent the Viking Great Army. In a subsequent publication, Jarman *et al.* (2019) investigated the level of mobility evident at Repton by analysing strontium isotopes in the context of ^{14}C dating on the tooth enamel of individuals buried across all of the cemetery areas. The $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ ranged from 0.7093 (grave 295) to 0.7144 (410). In 2004, Budd *et al.* made a start at this and published oxygen isotope data alongside the strontium isotopes for a small number of individuals (this data appears here as *Repton-B*) (Figure 14.2).

Oxygen isotope data from tooth enamel was available for seven individuals from Repton (see Budd *et al.* 2004a; Montgomery *et al.* 2014). The oxygen isotope data has previously been discussed by Budd *et al.* (2004a), but developments in methodology and interpretation since then have altered the picture slightly (see especially Daux

et al. 2008; Brettell *et al.* 2012; Chenery *et al.* 2012; Evans *et al.* 2012; Buckberry *et al.* 2014; Evans *et al.* 2018). In essence, while it was possible to recognise a variety of origins based on the strontium and oxygen isotopes in this paper, it was not possible to conclusively determine that they were not from Britain. In 2014, Montgomery and colleagues re-interrogated the data and also added lead isotope analysis for the seven individuals. Lead is absorbed through the skin and by ingestion and subsequently incorporated into skeletal tissues, not unlike strontium (Waldron 1978; Waldron *et al.* 1979; Lee-Thorp and van der Merwe 1991; Skerfving *et al.* 1998; Budd *et al.* 2000; Budd *et al.* 2004b; Montgomery *et al.* 2010; Kamenov and Gulson 2014; Killgrove and Montgomery 2016; Shaw *et al.* 2016; Evans *et al.* 2018). Due to the fact that tooth enamel is highly inorganic and does not remodel, we can assert that if lead is present in the tissue, the individual has been exposed to this element during their childhood – and specifically during the period of tooth formation. The addition of lead isotopes helped to single out the two associated male individuals buried in graves 511 and 295,

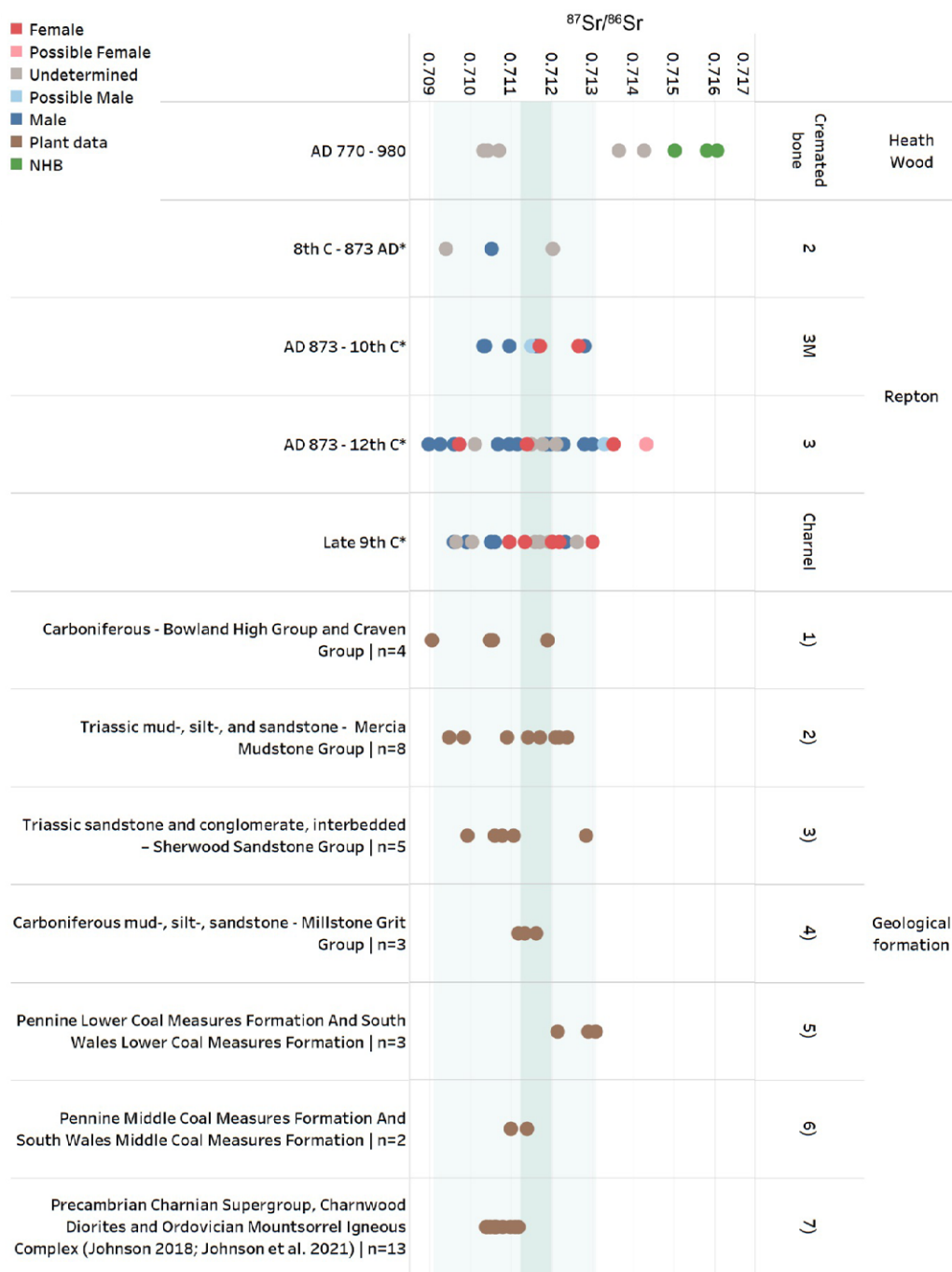


Figure 14.3: $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ plot displaying all published strontium isotope data for Repton and Heath Wood. Repton data from Jarman *et al.* (2019) and Budd *et al.* (2004a), divided into her chronological groupings (marked with *) for the different cemetery areas, Heath Wood data from Löffelmann *et al.* (2023). NHB = Non-human bone. Light green band denotes BASr for a 25km catchment based on plant samples. Dark green band is likely BASr for Repton specifically (Budd *et al.* 2004a; Jarman *et al.* 2019)

who were the only ones without a significant anthropogenic lead load amongst the group. The others had been exposed to lead much more heavily. Montgomery stated that ‘the lead data, therefore, would suggest that these two males [...] spent their childhood in a land untouched by the Roman Empire’s legacy of anthropogenic lead pollution, and had been exposed to low natural levels of lead [...]’ (Montgomery *et al.* 2014: 66). She asserted further, that if they were indeed Scandinavians, they would most likely have come from Denmark.

The lead data is interesting, specifically in the context of the Viking Great Army, for another reason: one type of object regularly found at Great Army campsites in Britain and therefore associated with the Army, is lead gaming pieces. The *type* of gaming piece itself is omnipresent in contemporaneous Scandinavia, but the material is not: only in English contexts are they made of lead (Jarman 2021: 85–86). If the lead concentrations of the five adult individuals from the charnel and grave 529 are considered, this means that they might have been part of the Army during their youth (all measured teeth were premolars, forming c. 2.5–6.5/8.5 years of age). Alternatively, they were exposed to English lead in some other way, for example, through handling lead weights (see especially Stos-Gale 2004: 328ff; Pedersen *et al.* 2016). It is curious, however, that this is in stark contrast to the two males in graves 511 and 295, who have much lower, natural lead levels and do not exhibit such an exposure. Perhaps, they only joined the army in later life, or they were not using the common lead gaming pieces. It is also intriguing that a child at Repton, dated to the seventh to eighth century, had a similarly high lead concentration in their canine (crown formation c. 7.5–6.5 years) to the five individuals. In this context, it becomes important that lead was mined in Derbyshire during the Roman period and again from at least 835 CE onwards (Tylecote 2002: 89). Exposure of local children to this ore at or around Repton may have been guaranteed in the ninth century, and we may expect that ‘locals’ exhibit high lead concentrations. If all seven individuals were indeed part of the Army, they almost certainly had different backstories. Some might have been accompanying the Army in childhood, while others joined much later as adults. Certainly, both men in graves 511 and 295 were not in close physical contact with English lead when they were growing up, which suggests that they may have been older when they embarked on their journey (Montgomery *et al.* 2014). There is clearly a lot of complexity still to investigate at Repton. Unfortunately, we cannot make wider reaching statements at this point until there is further oxygen or lead data available.

Through the amazing scientific method of aDNA analysis we know now that the males in graves 511 and 295 are almost certainly father and son, or possibly otherwise half-brothers (Jarman 2021: 25). In terms of $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$, it is

interesting to note that for the individual in grave 511, there is almost no change from the formation of his second premolar (c. 2.5–8.5 years) to that of his third molar (c. 7.5–16 years), and this allows us to speculate that the individual did not move significantly during his early youth. However, without the oxygen isotope data for his third molar, it is impossible to confirm this confidently. This generational aspect is fascinating to glimpse, and I hope that there will soon be more published data.

All of this information does not tell us anything about what goes on at Heath Wood, of course, and in order to answer your question, I will have to bring in more data. In the following plot (Figure 14.3), all the available strontium data for Heath Wood and Repton are combined to show the variation at the two sites. The plot includes data from those remains dated to the late ninth century (and onward) at Repton, according to Jarman *et al.* (2019), previously generated data from Budd *et al.* (2004a), which includes some of the same individuals as analysed by Jarman and colleagues, and finally data from cremated human and animal bone from mounds 50 and 56 from Heath Wood (Löffelmann *et al.* 2023). I have used the chronological groupings from Jarman and colleagues (2019) for the plot. Other samples that date to an earlier and a later phase in the Repton cemetery (cemeteries 1 and 2, and cemetery 4, respectively) have been excluded.

The light green band in the plot highlights the expected bioavailable strontium range (hereafter BASr) for a 25km catchment around Heath Wood, based on plant samples taken from each represented lithology (plotted by lithology) (Evans *et al.* 2018; Johnson *et al.* 2022; Löffelmann *et al.* 2023). The darker green band is the previously identified BASr for the area around Heath Wood and Repton which was based on dentine, soil, and faunal samples from the area (0.7112 to 0.7120) (Jarman *et al.* 2019). Although this narrower range is likely reflective of the immediate vicinity of Repton, the plant samples clearly show a much larger variation than this and suggest that anyone local to Repton who was eating food from the wider area could fall anywhere within the wider BASr (the light green band). We need to take into consideration the fact that the data points in the plot reflect slightly different life stages for the Repton individuals and the cremated individuals from Heath Wood. For inhumation burials, tooth enamel was used, which does not remodel after mineralisation in childhood, but this tissue is rarely available in cremation burials – enamel shatters when exposed to high temperatures. We therefore sampled cremated bone from the rest of the skeleton, which is subject to continued turnover in life. In essence, the $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ ratios for the inhumation burials in Repton reflect the strontium intake during childhood, while that of the cremated individuals reflects the average strontium intake over the last few years or decades of life, depending on the bone sampled (ICRP 1973, 1993; Parfitt 2002, 2004; 2013).

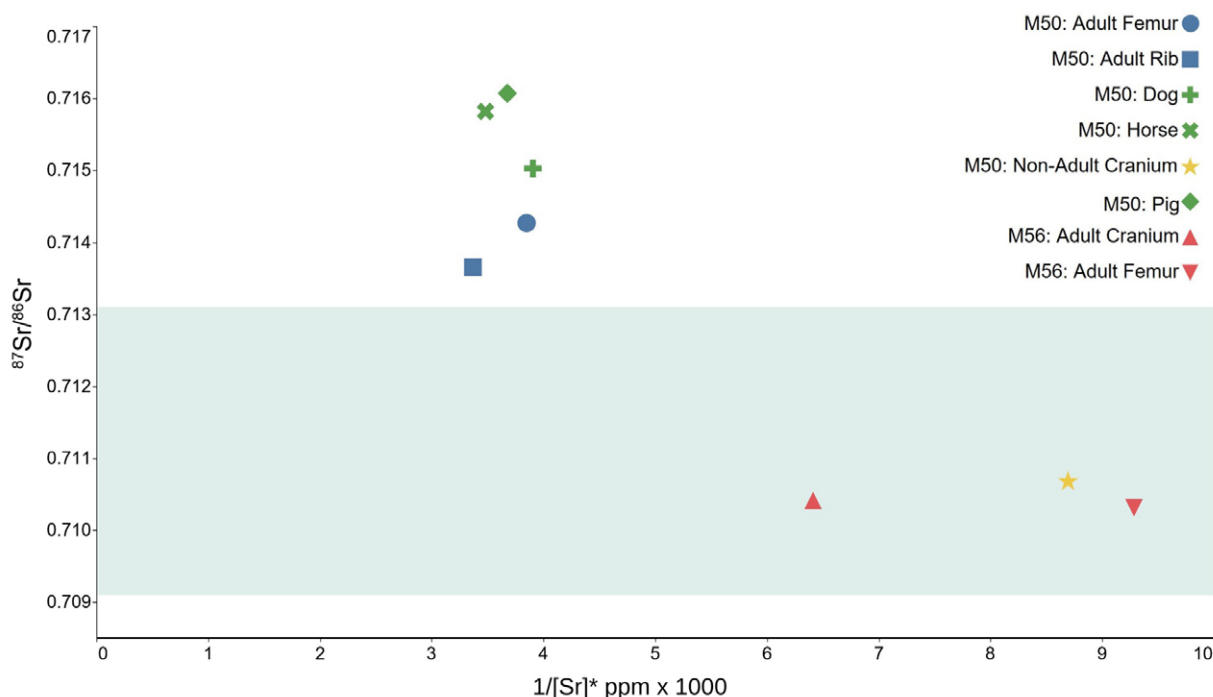


Figure 14.4: $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ vs $[\text{Sr}]$ (expressed as $1/[\text{Sr}] \times 1000$) for the humans and animals from mounds 50 and 56 at Heath Wood. Transparent green band indicates Sr biosphere within a 25km catchment of Heath Wood. Errors lie within the symbols. $^*[\text{Sr}]$ normalised to 40% Ca by wt. to account for organic loss. (Fig.6 in Löffelmann *et al.* 2023)

As Jarman *et al.* (2019) have argued, the plot shows that there is a large number of people dating to the late ninth century at Repton, whose $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ is consistent with the local environment. However, it is useful to note the degree of heterogeneity of the sample, and this is indeed suggestive of a variety of origins. In this comparison, we can now see that the individuals at Heath Wood are similarly varied in terms of their $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ as those at Repton, but the sample is much smaller. The other notable difference is the number of data points which are much higher in $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ than the BASr range for the catchment around Heath Wood; these individuals have certainly lived in an area with more radiogenic bedrock in the last decade or so before they died and were cremated.

We can break down the new data for Heath Wood further by plotting the strontium ratio ($^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$) against the strontium concentration ($[\text{Sr}]$) (Figure 14.4). In the plot below, some sample information has been added to highlight how the individuals relate to each other.

Clearly, we can see that the horse, dog, possible pig, and the adult from mound 50 have $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ values far beyond the BASr for the Heath Wood catchment. $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ ratios this high are indicative of Precambrian lithologies, gneisses, or granites. These can be found in Britain in small areas of Scotland, the Western Isles, outcrops in Wales, Herefordshire, and Devon. These lithologies are mostly limited in extent, however, which would likely cause some

mixing with input from lower $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ sources in real-life scenarios (Montgomery *et al.* 2007). Contemporaneous Scandinavian settlements at this time in Scotland and Ireland are almost exclusively located close to the coastline or on islands, and we have to take sea spray and marine resources into account for these communities: their $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ ratio would likely plot much closer to the seawater $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ ratio of 0.7092 (Montgomery *et al.* 2003; 2014). With consideration of the archaeological context, these individuals are most likely to have resided on the old lithologies of the Baltic Shield, more specifically, areas of Norway and northern/central Sweden (Löffelmann *et al.* 2023). This sets them apart from those individuals measured for $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ at Repton. For the latter, an origin is more difficult to define based on the isotopes, but Denmark and/or southwestern Sweden are contenders, certainly for the two males in graves 511 and 295 (see Budd *et al.* 2004 a; Montgomery *et al.* 2014; Jarman *et al.* 2019). The other two individuals at Heath Wood could be local to the area, or may have originated in Denmark or south-western Sweden – similarly to the two males buried in the Repton cemetery.

What does all of this data tell us more widely about the relationship between Heath Wood and Repton? Apart from the indication that the people interred at both cemeteries had heterogeneous origins, and thus likely came from different places in Scandinavia, we

can extrapolate from the entirety of the data that there were certain interpersonal relationships present at both cemeteries: for example, the familial kind between father and son in the adjacent graves 511 and 295 at Repton (Jarman 2021: 25). They were interred shortly after one another, and both suffered sharp-force trauma, which was almost certainly a consequence of battle. At Heath Wood, relationships are in part indicated by the $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ values, which show similar origins and mobility histories between the animals and the human in mound 50. Apart from this, I would like to point out the fact that the male in grave 511 at Repton was accompanied by a brilliant array of Scandinavian objects as well as a jackdaw bone and a boar's tusk. Here, we have the presence of animals, at least in part (possibly indicating a *pars pro toto*). We can only speculate about the inherent meaning, but I would argue that this is a very strong parallel to the inclusion of animals at Heath Wood – a connection, if you will. Some of the other individuals at Repton are also accompanied by the occasional Scandinavian artefact, but at a much smaller scale, and there are no other associated animal remains as far as I know. Grave goods at Heath Wood include weapons and jewellery, and the weapons were likely damaged before burial. So, there are both similarities and differences between the cemeteries. There is no doubt that at least some of the individuals at Heath Wood are from the northern part of Scandinavia, and at Repton some are from the more southern part. It is impossible to say at this point if they belonged to the same group and the use of both inhumation and cremation reflects the heterogeneity of the Great Army but perhaps also the contribution of local people to the burial populations too.

Cenotaphs?

FL: What's your take on the Heath Wood mounds that don't seem to contain human or animal remains?

TL: I honestly think that, at least in some cases, the excavation missed the cremation deposits. If we consult drawings of the archaeological excavations undertaken by Posnansky, for example, the trenches most often did not encompass the entire mound area, but instead cut through the middle. If mound 56 had been excavated like this, there is a high chance that the token deposit would have been missed. On the other hand, I do like the idea that some mounds might constitute cenotaphs to individuals interred elsewhere as part of a mobile fighting force.

Strontium isotope analysis

FL: How has the use of strontium isotopes helped you tackle questions around identity, mobility and agency?

TL: Strontium isotope analysis has been a gamechanger for the study of cremated remains, because other fre-

quently used isotopic methods and aDNA do not work on these remains. After Snoeck *et al.* (2015) showed that fully calcined bone fragments could be used to measure *in vivo* strontium reliably, it has finally been possible to include cremating communities in mobility questions. To answer your question, I would argue that mobility is intimately linked with identity and agency, especially because it is about the relationships between people and their environment (that is, things, people, animals, landscape etc.). If we can look at mobility through isotopic analysis, and by considering the wider, as well as the immediate physical archaeological context of the burials, we can try and examine social practice, questions of worldview and more. For Heath Wood, I will try and tackle this here to a certain extent.

The Viking Great Army appears to have been a composite of individuals from different Scandinavian origins. The isotopic evidence from many contemporaneous sites confirms that during the Viking period, Scandinavian armies were generally constructed in this way (Price *et al.* 2011; Chenery *et al.* 2014; Montgomery *et al.* 2014; Raffield *et al.* 2016; Jarman *et al.* 2018; Jarman *et al.* 2019; Hadley and Richards 2021: 58), and research based on other sources supports this (Raffield *et al.* 2016: 36). We appear to have individuals of differing origins at both cemeteries – Heath Wood and Repton. By extension, questions can be raised about the cohesion and group identity at work in this context. An important consideration is the nature of warfare in the context of source-acquisition at play during the movements of the Viking Great Army in the British Isles in the ninth century. Individuals of varied origins organised in smaller units called *lið*. Their identity was forged as they together confronted violence, the very real threat of death, and pain through injury. Whitehouse and Lanman (2014: 677) have highlighted what is termed '*identity fusion*' after impactful experiences which are stored in episodic memory due to their traumatic circumstances, and warfare clearly falls into this category. The theory purports that when individuals perceive that others in the group shared the same traumatic and dysphoric experiences as them, there may arise a sense of psychological kinship (see also: Raffield *et al.* 2016: 37). Traumatic events such as these are powerful generators for identity construction, and for the Viking Great Army, they almost certainly occurred repeatedly during conquest. There is little doubt that during its long progress through Britain, the various members of the Army developed a form of group identity based at least partially on these experiences. Where animals such as horses or dogs were part of these experiences, the inclusion into the psychological kinship group might have extended to them, especially when Viking Age ontological boundaries are considered. This cognitive process would have served to blur these boundaries more effectively



Figure 14.5: AI generated image of an early medieval funeral pyre with a horse (in woodcut style, prompt by T. Löffelmann)

through the recall of dysphoric events (episodic memory). Essentially, funerary rites which involved all senses and operated on a large scale, such as the cremations and mound constructions at Heath Wood, are products of a highly imagistic religiosity (Whitehouse 2004: 70) and likely commemorate not solely the dead humans (Lund and Arwill-Nordbladh 2016; see also Croix, this volume). These imagistic rites are defined by Whitehouse (2004: 70–73) as ‘rarely performed and highly arousing rituals [that] invariably trigger vivid and enduring episodic memories among the people who participate in them. It appears to be a combination of episodic distinctiveness, emotionality, and consequentiality that together result in lasting autobiographical memories.

At Heath Wood, mound 50 is an interesting example, because we can tell from the zooarchaeological analyses undertaken by Bond and Worley for the report that the horse was cremated on the pyre in full – the entire animal was present (Richards *et al.* 2004: 77–78, 80–81). The same was likely the case for the dog and possibly the pig. Imagine the energy it takes to cremate this many bodies (which are largely comprised of water)! It would have not only taken hours to cremate the individuals to the level of calcination that we end up with, but also maintenance of the pyre for hours (Figure 14.5). If this started during the day, it would have lasted well into the night. Sound, smell, and sight must have all been engaged in this process (see Williams 2004, Mason, this volume).

Human-animal relationships in death

FL: How do strontium isotopes inform us about human-animal relationships at Heath Wood?

TL: As I discussed previously, we use strontium to look at mobility, and mobility is, in essence, about relationships. These relationships can be untangled to some extent by considering the context of the site, the period in question, and a theoretical foundation. Not always have people thought about animals in the same way that we do now, ontological boundaries are not constant. Perhaps a good place to give an example of this for Heath Wood, is to look towards primary source material, such as the *Poetic and Prose Eddas*, *Icelandic Sagas*, law codes, and what these convey about the way that people perceived and engaged with their environment. Although these post-date the first landing and the movements of the Viking Great Army by two/three centuries, they can be used – with consideration of their historical context – to access themes or ideas which existed earlier (Hedeager 2011: 22; Brunning 2015: 54). One of the highlighted themes conveys that, in Norse mythology, there is a central place for animals. The sources tell of horses such as Sleipnir, Odin’s eight-legged horse, which can travel between the realms of the living and the dead (Sikora 2003/2004). The horses Arvak and Alsvinn pull the sun (Simek 1993: 19, 10–11; Faulkes 1995: 14), and Skinfaxi and Hrimfaxi are the bringers of day and night (Simek 1993: 289, 159; Faulkes 1995: 14, 137). Similarly,

dogs are prominent and powerful actors and allies, such as Garmr, Loki's offspring and the guardian of Hel's gate to the afterlife (Simek 1993: 100; Faulkes 1995: 34, 54), and Freke and Gere (wolves) who accompany Odin and feast on fallen soldiers (Simek 1993: 90, 106; Faulkes 1995: 33, 164; Gräslund 2004). Fenrir, although also technically a wolf, is well known as Odin's killer during Ragnarok, at the end of all things (Simek 1993: 80; Faulkes 1995: 15, 25–26). Dogs – and wolves – clearly embody liminality and enforce transition, often in the context of death and dying (Lurker 1969). Special value is also placed on boars in Norse myth, for example, attested by the presence of Gullinbursti in the twelfth century *Prose Edda*, where the boar is ridden by Freyr to Baldr's funeral (Faulkes 1995: 50), or in Valhalla, where the boar Sæhrímnir is hunted and feasted on every day only to live again the next day (Simek 1993: 273; Faulkes 1995: 32, 164). The boar is 'an endless source of food... [that] never dies' (Catts and Zurr 2013). Apart from being companion animals, Norse mythology and cosmology lend them an identity and agency which extends beyond mere co-existence with humans (Lurker 1969; Gräslund 2004; Jennbert 2011).

Ontological borders are transgressed in those stories which feature the *Æsir* (Norse gods of the principal pantheon, as opposed to the *Vanir* of the second pantheon) or ordinary people shifting shape into an *other*. Most often, this is an animal or another gender, sometimes both. Odin possesses the magical power called *seið* and is able to shape-shift because of this. It is precisely this quality that makes him one of the most powerful beings in Norse mythology (Hedeager 2011: 82, 84). He is the only one of the *Æsir* who can do so. Value is clearly attributed to this transgression of ontological and taxonomic boundaries in the Norse world, and, at the same time, the boundaries are blurred. Vivid examples are the narratives of people who take on specific qualities of animals, for example, in war. Four animals are particularly important in this context – the bird of prey, the wild boar, the wolf, and the bear, and these represent different ways of fighting, based on the respective animal's qualities (Hedeager 2011:

85–95). The arenas of action for animals and humans are therefore not separate, and certain qualities can create relationships and connections; these connections are also established between objects and beings (Abram 2019: 174). For example, Brunning has shown that swords were linked with snakes in the medieval Scandinavian mind (Brunning 2015). The recurrence in various primary sources of similar linkages, such as the one between swords and snakes, suggests that these were well-known associations. How far this understanding went is not completely clear, but there is an argument to be made that for some of the audience, the belief that one thing had the ability to change into the other was a physical reality. A warrior, donned with a certain linked symbol on a helmet, shield or sword, could *become* a bear (*berserk*) or a wolf (*ulfheðnar*) (Hedeager 2011: 95–96; Raffield *et al.* 2016: 43; see also Sayer *et al.* 2019). Certainly, the identification with particular animals, such as the bear or wolf by a group would have served to foster in-group cohesion as well (see Whitehouse 2004; Sayer *et al.* 2019).

This did not work solely through the content of mythology, but was also reflected in poetry, and through Old Norse poetic techniques. In particular, *kennings* are 'complex linguistic constructions' (Brunning 2015: 56) that 'operate like ... metaphor[s]' (Abram 2019: 171). Some of these kennings stem from the tenth, and even the late ninth centuries: the period in question here. *Kennings* are used to replace nouns in poetry, and many examples have been recorded online in the *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* database (Wills 2019a and b). A cat becomes *inn kámleita véli viðbjarnar aldinna veggja* – 'the dark betrayer of the wood-bear of old walls', where the 'wood-bear of old walls' is the *kenning* for 'mouse' (Clunies Ross 2017: 505). This example qualifies as a *double kenning* as it includes two substitutions (Faulkes 1995: 167–168). Similarly, the breast becomes *hlátrelliða* – 'of the laughter-ship', or *ógnstøðvar* – 'of the terror-place'. The latter are simple combinations of a *base-word* (ship, place), and a *determinant* (laughter, terror). Like the link between swords and snakes, a prescient example relevant

Table 14.1: Kennings for 'Bone' and 'Fire', and their interconnectedness. Source: The Skaldic Project. (Accessible at: <https://skaldic.org/skaldic/m.php?p=kennings>)

Referent	Old Norse	English	Reference	in
Bone				
	<i>sal mergjar</i>	the <u>hall</u> of marrow	Bjbp <i>Jóms</i> 31 ⁱ	Lethbridge 2012: 986
Fire	<i>alfrekr bani hallar</i>	the most ravenous slayer of the <u>hall</u>	Arn <i>Magnr</i> 8 ⁱⁱ	Whaley 2009: 217.
	<i>heiptir húss</i>	the destroyer of the <u>house</u>	Ótt <i>Knútr</i> 4 ⁱ	Townend 2012: 772.
	<i>lifgalli hallar</i>	the life-harm of the <u>hall</u>	Sturl <i>Hrafn</i> 11 ⁱⁱ	Gade 2009: 736.
	<i>húspjófr</i>	the <u>house</u> -thief	Þjóð Yt 20 ⁱ	Marold 2012: 44.

to this study is the relationship between buildings, the body, fire, and death (see Table 14.1). Frequently used *kennings* for fire or flames refer to the destruction of halls or houses. Indeed, this can be taken literally, seeing as any large structures like houses were constructed of wood during the Viking period, and therefore fire must have been a real danger. If we consider body-related *kennings*, however, the argument can be made that the references to 'halls' or 'houses' function just as well in the context of pyre cremation. In this case, the house or hall refers to the body, which is destroyed by fire. Although specifically found in Old English poetry and therefore not directly transferable to a Scandinavian context, the *kenning* used for body in *Beowulf* is *bān-hūs* – 'bone-house' (Heaney 2001: lines 2508, 3147). A similar connection is made in the Old Norse *kenning* for 'bone', which is *sal mergjar* – 'the hall of marrow' (Björp Jóms 31¹, Lethbridge 2012: 986).

In this way, *kennings* function to blur ontological and taxonomic boundaries between people, animals, and things. It is conceivable that in order to exist, these poetic devices must have been accessible to the audience they were composed for. The productive nature of *kennings* is underlined by Abram (2019: 170), who explains how the *base-word* and *determinant* of the composite create the *referent*, which, in turn, becomes another (a *new*) object. One could argue, based on the productive relationality of agency and personhood (Fowler 2004, 2016; Harrison-Buck 2018), that this is a much more subtle cognitive level on which agency is operational. As discussed by Harman,

When two objects enter into genuine relation, even if they do not permanently fuse together, they generate a reality that has all of the features that we require of an object. Through their mere relation they create something that has not existed before, and which is truly *one*. (Harman 2005: 85; also cited in Abram 2019: 171)

If we take the object-oriented view of how *kennings* work, we recognise that 'the human [animal, or object] is only one thing among many, that the person is made up of many objects (a hand, a head, generosity, a particular social status) and interacts with countless others' (Abram 2019: 174; square brackets by this author). Indeed, *kennings* appear to emphasise the idea that ontological borders are blurred, or at the least can be transgressed. In other words, the world and all the relationships in it are much less hierarchical and anthropocentric in the Viking mind, and this is expressed through literary devices (Kreager 2021).

Turning back to the archaeological evidence present at Heath Wood, it is possible to observe a similar transgression of ontological borders in the way that the physical remains are assembled. Through the process of cremation, the bodies of humans, animals, and objects – some of these purposefully damaged – become intermingled and essentially part of the same thing. In this way, destruction is a formative process where the end result is unlike anything that came before. Cremated bone from animals and people are virtually indistinguishable, and it is almost certain that the members of the community partaking in the cremation ritual would not be able to identify which bone belonged to whom once the pyre was extinguished. Even today, this is sometimes difficult to do for zooarchaeologists and osteoarchaeologists who specialise in this area of study. This is not to say that the presence of individuals amongst the remains post-cremation was disregarded. Rather, the intermingling of people with animals and jewellery or weapons was accepted, or even desirable. The removal of a portion of the cremated material from the pyre site of Mound 50, as well as the deposition of intermingled cremated bone under Mound 56, is perhaps an indication that the people cremating their dead at Heath Wood were thinking in terms of individual personhood (Fowler 2004; Harrison-Buck 2018), where the relationships between the community/group and those on the pyre were to some extent preserved in their post-cremation form. Williams (2001; 2004) broke this down very well for fifth to seventh century Britain, where there is a similar tendency to include animals in cremation funerary rites. The fact that the $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ of the animal remains indicate an origin in Scandinavia strengthens this point and alludes to the importance of these specific animals to the people they were travelling with, and/or who they were cremated with. Without the strontium isotope results, this is not something we could really discuss to this degree of depth. The isotopes here are reflective of connections between people and animals, and they help us to untangle the relationships at work at any given site. They certainly did at Heath Wood.

Concluding thoughts

HW: Is there anything you would like to add to what we've talked about?

TL: I think I would just like to underline the vast potential that strontium isotope analyses have for the study of cremation burials. When investigating agency, identity, and social practice, as long as we are willing to venture into the laboratory as well as into the archaeological theoretical realm, we can use evidence for mobility to explore and try and tease apart the relationships between people, animals, things, and the landscape.

Key data: Heath Wood, Ingleby

Where do Viking age cremations occur in your research area, and when do they date to?

I have had the privilege of working with cremated remains from Heath Wood in Derbyshire, the only known Viking cremation cemetery in the British Isles. Cremated bone from some of the excavated mounds has been radiocarbon (^{14}C) dated to the eighth to tenth centuries, which is quite broad but covers a very interesting period in the area. The burials are associated with the Viking Great Army, and they are the only ones we know of in the wider area (see Ó Ríagáin and Maldonado, both this volume).

In what forms are cremations deposited at Heath Wood? Are there any indications of pyres?

Heath Wood is a remarkable site – it is truly unique. We know of at least fifty-nine burial mounds on top of a small hill which is now forested. They are not particularly elaborate nowadays, but they used to stand out in the landscape. Pollen analysis suggests that the area was quite open, so views reached far (Richards *et al.* 2004). Only 20 mounds have so far been excavated by researchers – at different times in the last century (Clarke and Fraser 1946; Clarke *et al.* 1949; Posnansky 1956). We unfortunately do not know where exactly some of the remains are now, especially those from the excavations which took place in antiquity and in the 1940s and '50s. In the late 1990s, Julian D. Richards and Markus Jecock conducted a new research excavation, focussing on three mounds – 11, 50, and 56. Originally, they approached this with questions tackling the potential intercutting of mounds to investigate the sort of sequence we are looking at, but there was no evidence for intercutting (Richards *et al.* 2004).

In these recent excavations, it was noted that mound 50 contained the remains of an *in situ* pyre, while mound 56 only contained a token deposit. Indeed, in all previous excavations, the archaeologists found either cremation pyres *in situ*, token deposits, or empty mounds. The 'empty' mounds were originally considered to be cenotaph mounds, but Richards argues that these excavated mounds may not have been empty at all. Given that some of the token deposits were exceedingly small and not centrally located, it may be that they have been missed.

What types of containers are associated with cremations? (e.g. urns, wooden containers, leather pouches?)

It seems that the cremation burials at Heath Wood were not deposited in any containers. In mound 50, the remains were distributed within a thin layer of charred material. This was the *in situ* pyre, and the layer was spread across most of the central area of the mound. In mound 56, a small token

deposit weighing only about 198.1g was recovered, and this was spatially fairly restricted – but it is not clear whether it was originally contained in a cloth, pouch, or something similar.

When objects occur with cremations, what type of objects are they? (do they tend to be burnt or unburnt?)

There are objects contained within the cremated remains at Heath Wood. Very generally, most of the items are weapons or weapon-related. Distributed amongst the excavated mound burials, we have fragmented iron belt buckles, sword fragments, strap ends, hilt guard fragments, nails, a fragmented sword hilt grip (mound 50), but also silver-wire embroidery and bronze brooch fragments (mounds 11 and 6), as well as a plain-ringed loop-headed pin made of copper alloy. This list is not exhaustive, but most of the items were burnt – likely as pyre goods.

Are there funerary monuments or other structures surrounding cremations at Heath Wood?

The entire cemetery contains evidence of some fifty-nine mounds, which certainly qualify as monuments. They are clearly standing out in the landscape and were most likely created through the effort of cooperation and hard physical labour. The aim was the commemoration of particular people (and perhaps animals) in the context of elaborate funerals – and the solidification of their memory in the landscape that would last through the ages.

Where osteological data is available, is there any apparent selection of deceased according to their sex or age?

We have very limited information on the demographic profile of the individuals buried at Heath Wood. Jackie McKinley was able to determine a broad age range for the three individuals buried in mounds 50 and 56, but those in mounds 11, 5, and 6 could not be aged beyond the 'Adult' category (Richards *et al.* 2004). One individual in mound 50 was an infant/juvenile, so a young child. McKinley tentatively sexed the adult individual in mound 50 as a possible female (Richards *et al.* 2004: 76–79). To err on the side of caution, this sex determination did not feature as a dominant factor in any of my interpretations of the remains. The uncertainty is too high to rely too heavily on it and, by extension, what this might mean in the context of the archaeology. Cremation burials are notoriously difficult to analyse in terms of sex and age, and this needs to be reckoned with accordingly when interpreting the data. I would have liked to go back and look at the previously excavated material, but unfortunately, it seems like the excavators, or indeed the museums, did not keep the remains under curation. As I understand it, this has been the fate of many cremated remains in the past.

What relationship existed between inhumation burials and cremation burials at Heath Wood?

We do not have any inhumations at Heath Wood itself. There are, however, inhumation burials around St. Wystan's church at nearby Repton which are almost certainly contemporaneous with our cremation burials and which are intriguing in their own right. I have explored this further in my article in the context of my research using isotopes.

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Cremation Practices from Early Medieval Ireland: Burnt Christians and Interpretative Paradigms

Patrick Gleeson

Until very recently, the focus of studies of funerary practice in Ireland during later prehistory and the early medieval period has been elucidating the development of inhumation practices. There has been little dedicated work on the practice of cremation, and how it developed, while cremains have also tended not to be singled out for dating in post-excavation strategies. A growing body of evidence now indicates that cremation remained much more common than previously assumed, and this chapter explores some of the patterns evident in that emerging data. It reviews the role of cremation in a variety of contexts, and through a number of discrete social upheavals, including the conversion to Christianity.

Ideology; commemoration; early medieval; Iron Age

Introduction

Femke Lippok: Can you introduce yourself and your work on early medieval cremation burials?

Patrick Gleeson: I'm a landscape archaeologist specialising in the later prehistoric and medieval periods. I'm most interested in the first millennium CE focusing on royal and cultic landscapes, what is considered the Roman Iron Age and early medieval period in Ireland and north-western Europe. My work on cremation burial is almost accidental, but I've always been fascinated by burial practices in this context. In an Irish context, that has tended to be inhumation burial up until now, because these account for the most evident practices we can discern in the context of Christian conversion in Ireland, and a tangible expression of how royal landscapes and power were negotiated.

My work on cremation is a new development that came about mainly through healthy debates, with a colleague, Dr Rowan McLaughlin, formerly based at QUB, the British Museum, and now Maynooth University. Rowan is a specialist in big data and the analysis of ^{14}C dates. He has done some work using ^{14}C dating as proxies for demography and social changes within longer term perspectives. Really, my interest in cremation came out of talking with colleagues when he asked: 'what is the story with all these early medieval cremation burials?'. I replied glibly: 'well, there isn't any' and

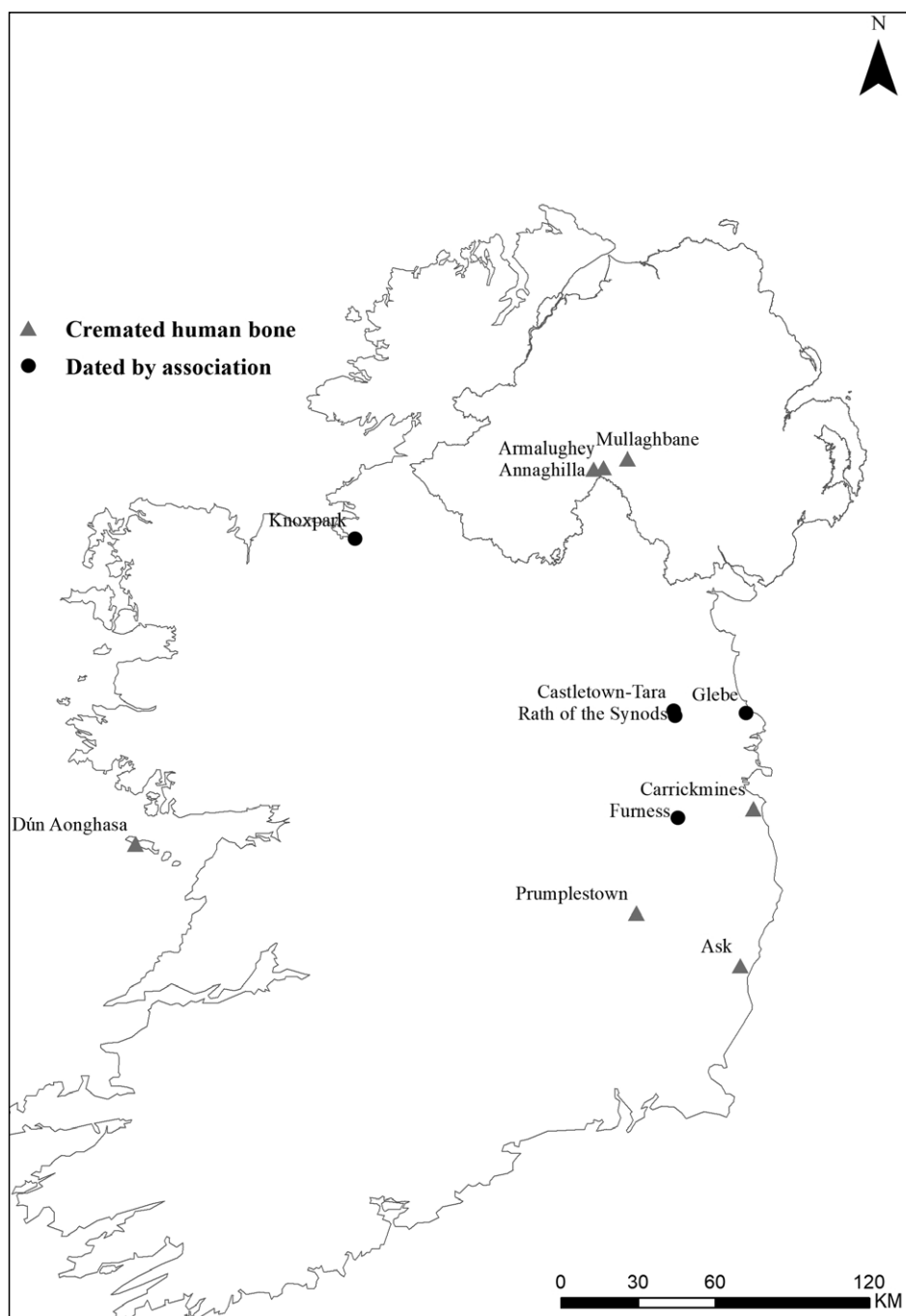


Figure 15.1: Distribution of sites with known cremations from first millennium CE Ireland, (by P. Gleeson)

we got into a friendly argument about whether this was the case or not. He assured me that there were loads of examples of early medieval cremation burials, and while I doubled-down that there were only a handful, I remembered attending a talk by Femke Lippok at a Society for Medieval Archaeology Colloquium in Durham, that addressed the continuity of cremation on the Continent after conversion to Christianity, and bi-ritual burials. So, Rowan promised to send me some data to prove his point. My attitude was sceptical, but when he sent

me the metadata, and once we started to look at it in more detail, we came across more and more examples. We reached a point where my assurances that there was really only a handful seemed fairly pig-headed, and so, our database for Ireland slowly expanded. While relatively small, the examples we have identified to date are significant since no one had previously assembled this evidence for these, and the established narrative, that made me so sure of my position, has seen cremations not targeted for dating by post-excavation

analysis to the same degree as inhumation (Figure 15.1; Gleeson and McLaughlin 2021).

While accidental, identifying a broader corpus of cremations fit in with my own changing perception of religion, ideology and belief as topics with which to engage with (e.g. Gleeson 2017; 2020). It also helps us when analysing early medieval Ireland's cult centres in a northern European context too.

Interpretative contexts

FL: What is the generally accepted explanation for the occurrence of cremation in your research area and what's the background to that interpretation?

PG: This is a tricky one because, to date, it has essentially been to state that cremation was 'paganism'. We know that is quite a problematic idea in the context of how burial archaeology has developed over the last 30 years or so and interpretative frameworks have become more refined with ideas of social status, social identity and ethnicity more broadly since the 1980s and 1990s. Work by Adrián Maldonado and others have challenged traditional frameworks in particular by considering mortuary practice in relation to commemorative strategies (e.g. Maldonado 2011; 2013). To a large degree, it has become increasingly redundant to see religion in terms of burial evidence, but in Ireland that framework has endured, especially for cremation, in even more recent analysis. For inhumation burials, that approach has declined, inspired by approaches in Britain, problematising the link between inhumation and Christianity, but there is always a relic assumption that cremation is, by definition, 'pagan'. Now it may or may not have been 'pagan' in individual instances; that point is irrelevant really, but that religious assumption is aligned in an Irish context with an ethnocentric assumption that cremation is a 'native' form of burial in a culture-historical framework for how burials have more broadly been interpreted. So, the narrative has been built that cremation was the dominant form of burial through later prehistory – the Bronze Age and Iron Age – with the reintroduction of inhumation in the fourth–sixth centuries CE (depending on how we read the radiocarbon dates), evidencing something new, introduced from outside – namely Romano-British or 'Christian' styles of burial (McGarry 2008; 2010; O'Brien 2020). While we see that evidence interpreted less in terms of Christianisation and conversion than two decades ago, there has still been the assumption that essentially cremation is the hangover from pagan beliefs that existed throughout the Iron Age. There hasn't yet been critical reanalysis of that assumption, so we haven't really understood the nature of cremation, or holistically assessed its role as a burial rite and commemorative strategy during the early medieval period. All studies

of cremation by definition then, tended to stop at about c. 400 CE, because it was generally assumed that the rite ceased at that time. That is really the key point: religious change has hitherto defined disposal methods for the dead with regards to Ireland, and these are linked to essentially culture-historical frameworks.

FL: You've discussed how there is this big divide between the prehistoric and early medieval periods perceived in Irish archaeology and history, enhanced by the absence of the Roman intervention (Gleeson and McLaughlin 2021). You go into how this reflects a long tradition of romantic nationalism linking primordial paganism to the pre-Christian past. So, my second question was about how cremation was part of this tradition of interpretation?

PG: To a degree, yes, there is a mythology that has grown up around later prehistoric belief systems and the modern-day baggage that goes with that (Gleeson 2020). On the other hand, I'm not sure that it is entirely fair to some of the nuanced scholarship – albeit, with which I may not always necessarily agree – but appreciating the problems associated with modern constructs of pre-Christian Celtic paganism is certainly part of the problem. Ireland is a strange place in terms of the historiography of scholarship in this regard during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The nature of the Irish Free State and later the Republic of Ireland necessitated the mythology of the birth of the nation of Ireland in the 'Golden Age' of early Christian conversion. This is embedded in the creation of the national museum and its collections, for instance, and Christianity, as the religion of that Free State and Republic, is tied into that national myth, lingering in various incarnations right down to the present-day (Waddell 2005). The body of medieval literature that survives from Ireland is incredibly rich and justifiably famous for what it preserves about early Irish society. Yet, the insights into pre-Christian belief systems and cosmology that it provides are somewhat moot; I've disagreed with this interpretation of this material, and suggested that much of what we see as 'pre-Christian' is created for political and exegetical reasons in the medieval period (e.g. McCone 1990). Cremation, in terms of how it has been analysed, therefore, has been assessed relatively similarly, namely as essentially a material narrative of pagan belief, and the pagan-Christian transition. The degree to which it has been assumed that cremation ultimately equates to pagan belief and a reluctance to interrogate that permeates much scholarship and has proved resilient. That's probably the context in which it was easier to continue seeing cremation as 'pagan' even though scholars were increasingly refining their interpretation of inhumation practices. It's perhaps

counter-intuitive to a degree, but it now becomes easier to see it as linked to 'lingering paganism' in the fifth–sixth centuries, part of a narrative that has endured for c. 100–150 years. So, there are elements of the scholarship quite nuanced and important, but I do think the mythology of pre-Christian Ireland endures in the interpretation of cremation as a pagan rite.

Howard Williams: I wondered specifically: has there been a folkloric pagan cliché associating paganism with fire rituals that has more broadly informed this interpretation of cremation as pagan?

PG: I don't think there is a huge amount of pseudo-anthropological or ethnographic accounts of cremation and fire rituals in Ireland. In terms of the Later Iron Age (first–fifth centuries CE) and the use of later documentary sources, these are seventh century CE onwards, and the assumption that they were a 'window on the Iron Age' no longer holds much weight (pace Waddell 2014; 2018). Much of the folklore that we have in Ireland is really built out of that much later period, medieval and post-medieval traditions, perhaps much more so than in the Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian traditions, because part of a cultural consciousness overtly framing Irishness and an Irish identity. However, they don't really refer to cremation all that much. There are a few indirect references to death involving burning, which may be cremation, in the same way as in *Beowulf*, for instance, and other texts describe these sorts of rituals and mortuary theatre. Even in terms of hagiographical texts where they talk about clearly non-Christian death (technically, they refer to gentiles rather than pagans), they don't really refer to cremation. In some sense, this makes it all the more unusual that we have this continued evidence for it now. There are one or two snippets of references which may or may not refer to someone being burnt or cremated, but they are not really direct evidence of cremation. There is no sense from these sources that the dominant form of pre-Christian disposal of the dead was cremation, for example. There are, for instance, traditions of burial upright in burial mounds or burial places, facing traditional enemies. Probably this is more so because of the tradition of the 'warrior burial' from the North Sea region, as Betty O'Brien (2020) has suggested: they don't correspond to the archaeological evidence for later prehistoric or early medieval burials (and they are seventh century or later references anyway). But in terms of later mythical and folkloric evidence, more so in Ireland than elsewhere, these seem to be influenced by the sensibility of a corpus of medieval literature, as it is becoming ingrained in the creation of a Celtic identity during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I don't know how genuine folkloric traditions, and actively

curated fictions connected with modern-day nation building can easily be separated really.

FL: Are there any remarkable or anecdotal explanations for the occurrence of early medieval cremation burials that you have come across?

PG: The short answer is probably 'no': in the sense that cremation has tended to be interpreted in early medieval Ireland as an anomaly up to the eighth century CE, when really just a lingering 'late pagan' rite. If it is later still, invariably it has been inferred to be 'Viking' and thus related to the Scandinavian diaspora and settlement of Ireland. But people just haven't looked at cremation practices in Ireland in order to even explain the phenomenon at specific sites. So when these graves have been excavated, they have been remarked as 'odd' or strange, rather than any interpretive paradigm developed. They are simply interpreted as 'odd' or 'unusual' in contrast to a homogenous understanding of unfurnished inhumation burial as the 'norm', however. In terms of the later prehistoric period when there is cremation, people would still understand it as a relatively 'normal' rite of burial expressed in terms of the nature of the way the body is disposed of and used as an aspect of material culture within burial rites. But there aren't any usual examples outside of ones with limited arrays of grave-goods.

The one that probably stands out in my head isn't specifically a human cremation. There is a really odd site in the South West of Ireland – Cloghermore – this is a cave in Co. Kerry, and had a whole host of disarticulated human remains dated to between the seventh–tenth centuries AD, but specifically in the ninth century there was a pyre constructed at the entrance of the cave (Connolly *et al.* 2005). This had a host of burnt bones, but none of it has been positively identified as human. There are all sorts of unusual explanations as to whether this is late pagan or 'Viking', but this is an exceptionally unusual site and assemblage. This is the one that sticks out as 'very strange', but perhaps that is because we haven't looked hard enough for comparable evidence. There are radiocarbon dates and a couple of attempts to try and reassess the evidence and explain it, but they have probably leaned towards the 'well it's all Viking and they did strange pagan things; *ipso facto* cremation = pagan'.

In terms of the Christianisation of Ireland, this is a huge part of the interpretative paradigm and I would strangely enough be one of the people who would say that west–east extended supine inhumation must be related to the introduction of Christianity. I say that partly because when we start to get it in the fifth century, there are no certain fourth-century examples for west–east extended supine inhumation. Where we find those early inhumations in the fifth/sixth century, they are

in landscapes with conversion-period churches and constitute the new forms of cemeteries (Gleeson 2017; Ó Carragáin 2022). For me, this combination suggests that they are expressing new ideas through new burial rites, in new contexts. The end of the sixth century and the start of the seventh century is when most of the founding saints of churches around Ireland are supposed to have lived, and when most churches are founded in terms of toponyms. So, by the time we get to the late seventh century it is very hard to believe that there were large sections of the population who were not Christian, because Ireland has one of the densest concentrations of churches in Europe in this period, famous for its sculpture, a golden age of metalwork marked by Christian iconography, all flourishing at this time, and within the context of a Latinate Christian literati too. So, as far as conversion and Christianisation in Ireland is concerned, by the seventh century, it is well underway. This doesn't mean there couldn't be people still having non-Christian beliefs, but because of that wider tendency with the later evidence to either see cremations as a 'slow-burn' expression of religious change, very odd or caused by external influence (since every 'native' would be Christian by the seventh/eighth centuries), there has never been an exploration of the idea that people born and raised in Ireland who didn't believe in Christianity, could have persisted. So, we go back to that mythical nationalistic narrative I mentioned earlier, and I think that that is maybe part of the issue with interpreting this evidence.

FL: It makes me wonder in relation to what Bonnie Effros says for the Merovingian world that the church doesn't have any control over how people buried their dead before the eighth or ninth century (Effros 2003: 85). Do you know of any such idea for Ireland?

PG: Yes, so this is probably part of it too. The dominant explanation for the development of burial in the early medieval period in Ireland is the work of Elizabeth O'Brien, who has done amazing work over the last thirty years in dating extended supine inhumation burial, in her *Mapping Death* book (O'Brien 2020). She suggests exactly this, that the church wasn't very interested in regulating burial before the late seventh century when we do start to see changes in burial grounds. Yet, in the very nuanced model she has created, it is essential that because some of the two sigma radiocarbon dates start off in the third and fourth century, even if they go on to the fifth and sixth century, probably west-east inhumation was introduced in the fourth century and unlikely to be Christian. Hence, the spread of west-east extended inhumation is unhooked from the spread of Christianity. But if west-east inhumation isn't Christian when it is introduced, then when does

it become Christian? When we see change in the seventh/eighth centuries, in O'Brien's model this is related to the removal of burial from ancestral burial places to the church. This is therefore very similar to Bonnie Effros' explanation, and we do see hagiographical texts at the time showing an increasing interest in the 'nature' of burial. However, we have to balance that against the fact that these hagiographical texts there are our earliest surviving Christian texts; we don't have fifth/sixth/early seventh-century Christian texts, so it is tautological to see it as a new Christian interest, perhaps. The interest we see in burial in the hagiographical texts linked to the change in burial tradition is related to the removal of burials to churchyards and ultimately this is common at the end of the Christianisation process. For O'Brien, at that point burial is starting to be 'Christian'.

The problem I would have with that is that those west-east inhumations are found in landscapes that have conversion-period churches, in some cases at least by the end of the fifth century CE. It is hard to imagine these landscapes not being defined by some kind of Christian influence on burial traditions. The flipside too is that we don't have evidence for the upsurge of burials in churchyards or in the vicinity of churches during the eighth/ninth and tenth centuries, at least from radiocarbon dates and excavations. Burial was occurring in churchyards but we also don't see a sharp shift in the eighth century from those ancestral burial grounds, located away from ecclesiastical sites, to churchyards. The traditional burial grounds that emerge in the fifth century continue in use into the ninth/tenth and even the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The biggest period of change is probably during the tenth/eleventh centuries rather than the seventh/eighth centuries and this relates to pastoral networks being created at that point rather than conversion, for me. As far as cremation is concerned, this is the wider interpretive paradigm of conversion and Christianisation can be set against, but that changes when we start to see continuity of cremation down past the eighth century, in some cases as late as the twelfth century CE.

A related and important element is that we can now recognise that the data for cremation seems to show an upsurge in Ireland during the seventh/eighth centuries, when the traditional model would suggest increasing Christian oversight of burial practices, and the shift towards churchyards. Is this even relevant, therefore, to think about the religious alignment of these burials, as their defining characteristic?

Reflections on new research

FL: Let's now discuss your article with McLaughlin, presenting evidence that the cremation burials identified are just the tip of the iceberg and many more will be found (Gleeson and McLaughlin 2021). You present a



Figure 15.2: Plan of the complex at Annaghilla, where a large number of early medieval cremations have been recovered alongside inhumation burials (after Dunlop and Barkley 2015: 126; figure by author)

radical reinterpretation of mortuary archaeology in early medieval Ireland. Can you explain the heterogeneity you discuss in your article?

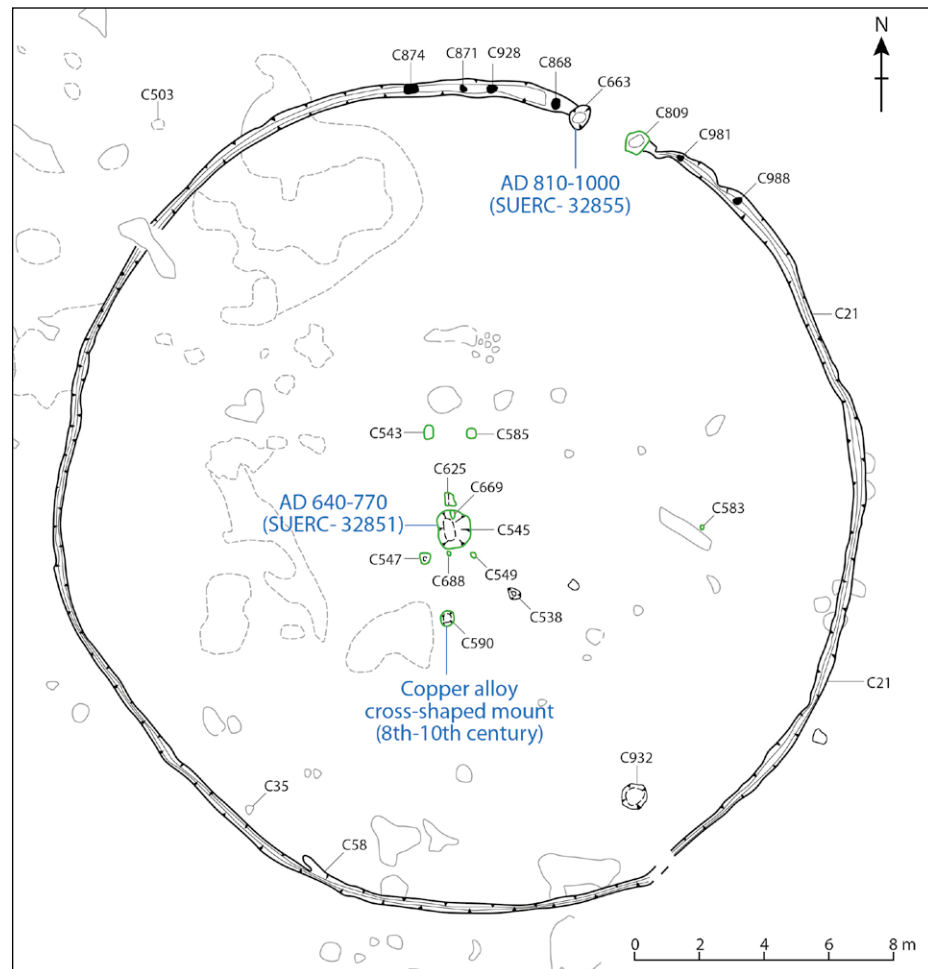
PG: This builds on the critique of the interpretative framework – and an accidental discovery; we didn't set out to systematically study cremation, and we 'happened upon it' by looking at some radiocarbon dates and asking: how many are enough to evidence a phenomenon, and how much of this is just 'continuity' from a pagan period? The jury is still out, but regarding the idea of it being the tip of the iceberg, I do believe that is the case. When we started to look, we went very quickly from low tens to twenties and more before we surmised ultimately we could hypothesise many more.

We had twenty-seven dates for cremation burials that belong to the period 300–1200 CE. Twenty-two of those are on cremated bone and the rest are securely dated from related contexts. There's no debating that evidence, and you have to set that in the context of most excavation reports where cremation burials are encountered, even in the area of early medieval cemeteries, assume that these

are 'Iron Age' because they are 'cremations' – cremations are automatically assumed to be later prehistoric. So, then we suddenly have a far larger sample of potential early medieval cremation burials. Without the intention of specifically examining this phenomenon, producing so many was surprising.

For example, at Castletown, Tara, cremations were dated presuming they would be Neolithic, but the results produced in five examples from that site alone suggested that all belonged to the early medieval period. Without grave goods or pyre goods, it has to be imagined that most excavators will not attribute them to the Early Middle Ages. If you accept that our sample remains problematic because of its small size, we must balance that against that sample not explicitly arising from targeted radiocarbon dating programmes. Once we started to look, we built a picture of further examples of early medieval cremations. We have now thirty-five cremations from thirteen widely dispersed sites. Admittedly, if we set that against west-east extended inhumation from the same period, we have a couple of hundred dates and excavated examples in the thousands, but thirty-five cremations is still a

Figure 15.3: Plan of the palisaded enclosure site containing cremation pits at Ask, Co. Wexford (after Stevens 2012: illustration 6; figure by author)



good sample given the circumstances of research. When we have large infrastructure developments with huge radiocarbon programmes directed at funerary complexes, we tend to see lots of dated inhumations from individual sites (O'Brien 2020; Ó Carragáin 2009; McGarry 2008; 2010). The fact is that, by contrast, cremation has been generally dated by proxy via culture-historical paradigms, and that is the essence of the issue. Therefore, I think it probably is the tip of the iceberg, or at least we cannot say there isn't a wider phenomenon of cremation unless we go back and systematically date the archival data sets assumed to be later prehistoric cremations. It's also important to remember and highlight that some of this material is also possibly being overlooked and considered 'midden material' or 'animal bone'. At the site of Ask, Co. Wexford, the cremated material wasn't positively identified as human because it was heavily damaged and fragmented (Stevens 2012). Similarly, at Annaghilla and Mullaghbane, the context of disposal of cremated human bone seems to be in contexts not conventionally defined as graves, namely, scatters in gullies associated with buildings or other features in a wider settlement that

could easily be mistaken for rubbish (Figure 15.2; Dunlop and Barkley 2016: 126–31). Yes, in some cases, as at Ask, there is still the possibility that this might be animal, but the context of deposition in clearly defined pits, with grave goods, and within a palisaded enclosure here suggests that human remains is much more likely (Figures 15.3 and 15.4; Stevens 2012). So, there is a need for excavation strategies not only to include bioarchaeological specialists, but also the systematic dating of the material to determine whether it is Iron Age or early medieval.

The issue of heterogeneity too: this is the second part of the question and it goes back to the nature of the question: how has burial been understood in Ireland, particularly in the brilliant work of Betty O'Brien? While her work is excellent in many, many regards, up until very recently, a lot of it interpreted the material in a very generalised way.

A lot of the sense of heterogeneity arises from an expectation of fairly normative rites – we have this coherent model for how burial develops, but not for how we interpret mortuary variability: against the longer term. For instance, a very basic question is how was burial



Figure 15.4: Cross-shaped mount from Ask, Co. Wexford, found on top of a seventh–eighth-century CE cremation pit. (figure by P. Stevens)

practice used to express different ideas and identities? Cremation was part of this – as some cemeteries are using cremation and inhumation together. Moreover, inhumation practices were actually quite diverse. The paper I think of in this regard is Adrián Maldonado’s work for early medieval Scotland. He has made some really interesting arguments regarding the choices made in early medieval inhumation practices. These are not as overt in terms of grave goods, which makes early Anglo-Saxon mortuary practices so fascinating and captivating, facilitating the complex interrogation of status and mortuary theatre that we see in the work of Duncan Sayer (2020) or Howard Williams (2006). However, once you apply the sorts of ideas developed by Maldonado for Scotland to the Irish evidence, the meaningful decisions made to construct inhumation burials suggests a huge spectrum of rites (or practices more correctly) as viable and acceptable. This is what we need to do next, to interrogate that variability in local contexts; I have a PhD student (Clair Richardson) working on this next to doing statistical analyses of cemeteries to look at grave-depth and grave-construction and the position of the body – all the internal variations in inhumation practices that have thus far been occluded. But returning to cremation, interrogating the varied contexts in which cremation burials are found and the burial practices themselves are a further spectrum we haven’t fully explored or explained.

FL: Do you think people were cremating all over Ireland in the Early Middle Ages or was it a practice restricted to particular regions?

PG: I’m virtually certain they are cremating all over the island of Ireland. Our data explored in the *Antiquity* paper is biased not only by the fact it is still a very small assemblage but also because most of the excavations are linked to infrastructure projects in the east of Ireland and therefore restricted in the vicinity of the major towns and cities such as the road schemes. Some of the most impressive sites – such as Annaghilla and Mullaghbane – these link to road schemes in the north of Ireland, so there is a bias in where these sites are being found. There is good evidence for cremation in other sites in other parts of the country too, so in Cork and Galway there are further sites where cremation has been found in early medieval contexts, while we also have the fascinating site mentioned earlier at Cloghermore Cave, Co. Kerry, in South West Ireland. In the west of Ireland sites like Cross don’t have explicitly dated cremation burials but do have cremation deposits presumed to be Iron Age within otherwise early medieval inhumation cemeteries: this is the classic example of whether they are Iron Age or are they early medieval. Then we have sites like Kiltullagh in the far west of Ireland on the Mayo/Roscommon border where there was an inhumation burial excavated beneath a standing stone with at least one, possibly two, cremations, but which were disregarded as Iron Age simply because they were cremations. At Kiltullagh, the inhumation burial was dated to the fifth/sixth centuries and contextually, the cremation burials were associated; my predecessor at Queen’s University Belfast, Finbar McCormick, the excavator, told me this, that there was no stratigraphic reason to believe they were earlier. In terms of the distribution we have at the moment, then, I am fairly certain they are concentrated in the east and the north because of developments here, but there are examples to the west like Cross, Kiltullagh and even in the Western Arran Islands (Dún Óengussa) dated to the early medieval period. Undated examples in the South West and the South as well as the Midlands/West all suggests we are looking at a pan-island practice, not some regional oddity. How prevalent cremation was requires more work, but I would be relatively confident (as much as anyone can be) that this material is testament to a prevalent phenomenon.

FL: One other observation of your recent article is that radiocarbon dating of cremation and inhumation burials in Ireland and Scotland look very similar as opposed to other parts of southern and central Britain.

PG: I’m not sure how much that contrast would stand up to close scrutiny, as this was one of those observations that was really an accidental addendum to a very short piece arguing for continued activities for cremation in Ireland. One key element is that, in terms of background information in relation to the cremation material that we have, the

pattern we see is relatively clear: we have continuity of cremation through the early medieval period and a peak shown in the radiocarbon dating in the later seventh and eighth centuries CE in Ireland, mirrored in the seventh–ninth centuries in Scotland. We also have continuity at least as late as the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Ireland, which is very late and certainly not something we had expected. The peak in the seventh/eighth centuries is very interesting, and it is something that we wanted to explain further. That's where my colleague Russell Ó Riagáin had mentioned evidence from Scotland. We didn't look at it in any systematic way but drew on Russell's article and asked Adrián Maldonado for some input, who mentioned a few further examples from his PhD, and recently excavated at Forteviot (Maldonado 2011: 87 and 106–108; 2013: 11–12; see also Maldonado, this volume; Ó Riagáin 2016: 156–60). Russell Ó Riagáin (2016; this volume) had suggested that these were Scandinavian burials or at least suggested a Scandinavian context for these burials in western Scotland and we had the same explanation to account for burials at Ask and other later first millennium CE sites in Ireland. However, subsequently we realised that some of these dates might have other explanations, and some are certainly earlier than the 790s CE, with parallels in Scotland (Gleeson and McLaughlin 2021). This doesn't mean they are unrelated to Scandinavian colonisation, but we needn't make that link the first and inexorable explanation for a range of examples. Instead, this must be set against the evidence for an existing phenomenon of cremation in Ireland. I think that overall the evidence as it is needs to be more carefully assessed, but with this caveat that the evidence in Ireland for a peak finds parallels with hints of cremation elsewhere. I strongly suspect that if we look more closely at the Scottish evidence and even the Anglo-Saxon evidence, we might find closer parallels. I'm unaware of cremations in the South West Britain and Wales, but one of the reviewers of the *Antiquity* article did suggest that you would expect to find this to be in these areas and, yes, we should be looking for it! (see also Lippok and Williams, this volume.) The same bias of presuming they are 'pagan' and 'pre-Christian' needs to be challenged.

Then there are examples of late cremations from 'Anglo-Saxon' cemeteries, with the St Mary's Southampton cemetery as a very pertinent example (Birbeck 2005). The abiding question is whether we are identifying something specific to Ireland and Scotland, or something that is in fact part of a broader phenomenon we haven't identified elsewhere. I suspect we simply don't have a good handle on the later horizons of cemeteries as expressed in western and eastern Britain, for instance, where radiocarbon dating has not often been systematically deployed (see for example, Astill 2009). I suspect that targeted radiocarbon dating from cemeteries will only

help to identify later horizons. In Ireland and elsewhere, people don't necessarily tend to date the latest phases of cemeteries in post-excavation strategies; there is a tendency to focus on the earlier dates and ditches around cemeteries but not middle and later phases, often where artefactual evidence infers later activity in any case. I think that is a big part of the problem.

HW: I think that really pushes the changing relationships between the paradigms and the data, for in the eastern England context, the push has been to make the chronology earlier and declining, and gone before Christian conversion, as part of a broader shift against the migrationist narrative, downplaying the significance of cremation burial practices as a reflection of long-term and enduring pagan Germanic influences (as addressed in, for example, Williams 2002; Lippok 2020). Then again, there are these later examples which you cite, such as St Mary's, so perhaps we are still trying to create a uniform culture-historical explanation for the presence/absence of cremation, and we are still falling into the same trap of looking for a coherent singular origins and cause in terms of external influence and immigration. This new work turns the tables on that whole approach, therefore, and not simply for Ireland. And I fear we might equally be overlooking late cremations in southern and eastern (lowland) Britain too; I don't think people have looked. And we have to consider the potential for Irish influence in western Britain and consider cremation as a part of that possibility also. Do you have any thoughts on that part of the discussion?

PG: Essentially, we have an implicit culture-historical paradigm at play here, both in Ireland and Britain. I suspect we should pay greater attention to the later phases of cremation cemeteries as well as looking elsewhere for occasional and sporadic burials. Likewise, we need more radiocarbon dating to identify the origins and character of middle-Anglo-Saxon unfurnished inhumation burials too, as this is part of the broader problem of religious/cultural inferences from the 'final-phase' of furnished burial and later burial. For instance, we may have chronological gaps and complex local variabilities we are not spotting, akin to some of the cemeteries in Ireland where we seem to have long gaps in the burial record; we have some cemeteries originating in the fifth–seventh centuries for adult burials, but with no later adult burials, as they continue for children and infants in the eighth–eleventh centuries only. So, all of these questions about the internal chronologies and radiocarbon data might reveal new vistas and resolve our data even more closely. We also have to consider age and gender patterns that might be revealed with more refined chronological resolution of cemetery datasets.

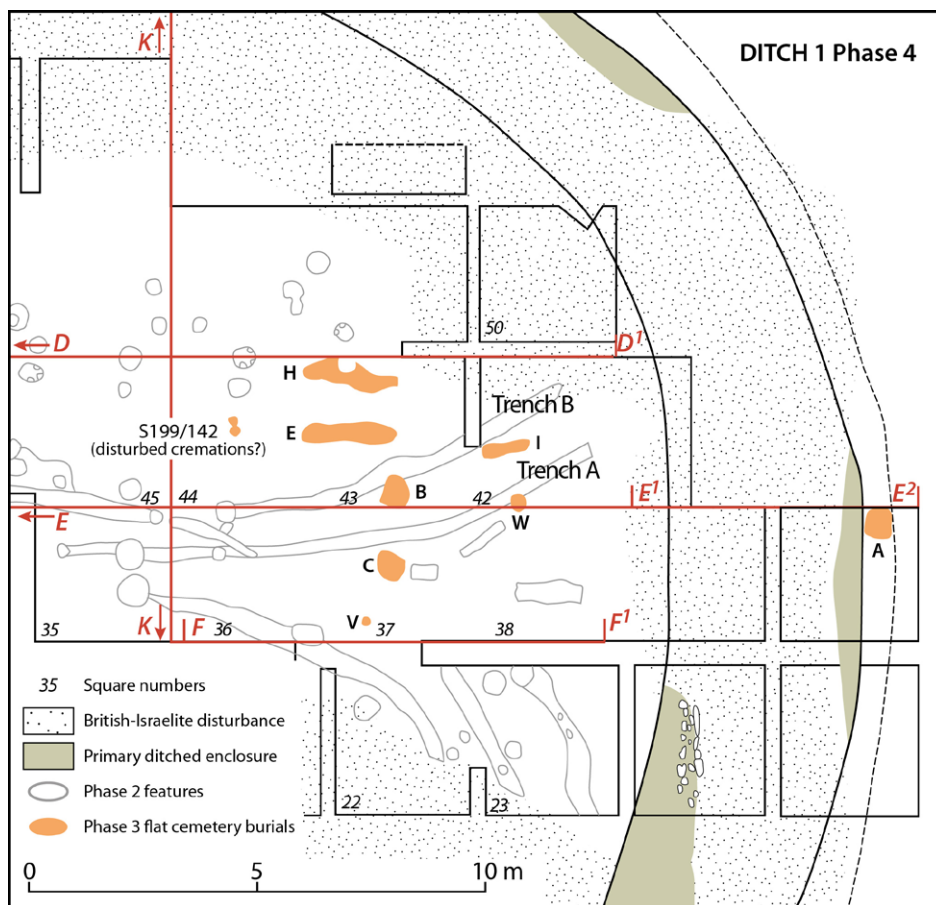


Figure 15.5: Plan of the burials identified at the Rath of the Synods, Tara, Co. Meath, adjacent to the Church of St Patrick on the hilltop (after Grogan 2008, fig. 3.5; figure by author)

HW: Yes, the Bayesian analysis of burials refining the later sixth and seventh-century assemblages focus on furnished inhumation burials (Bayliss *et al.* 2013) but more work is indeed needed on eighth–eleventh-century ‘Anglo-Saxon’ burial sites whether field cemeteries or associated with ecclesiastical sites.

Future research priorities

FL: Which site in your research area featuring cremation burials deserves more attention and why?

PG: I really struggled with this question because I don’t think we have a good enough understanding of the nature of cremation in Ireland to even be in a position where it is possible to identify which single site is particularly prominent and demanding of further attention to explore more about these phenomena. Beyond the site of Ask, and even there only seven–eight possible cremations, we don’t have ‘cremation cemeteries’ per se – by which I mean a distinctive cemetery where cremation is the dominant or only rite. The cremation burials for the middle and later first millennium are, for the most part, individual or small numbers of cremation burials that have been almost ‘accidentally’ uncovered or identified close to or amidst early medieval inhumation graves.

So, if I have, say, one hundred radiocarbon dates to deploy, I would probably start going back to archives and dating supposedly later prehistoric/Iron Age cremation burials *en masse* rather than focusing in on one specific site. There are a couple of sites to look at in this regard, but these are also very problematic. One is the Rath of the Synods at Tara, which was excavated in the 1960s and early 1970s. The excavator S.P. Ó Riordan died soon after and the site was only published in 2008 by Eoin Grogan (2008). That is a really fascinating site but incredibly problematic in terms of its dating and stratigraphy because the publication assembled the case argued by the excavator in the 1950s (see Figure 15.5). Although it has a series of radiocarbon dates in the appendix, these prove that the stratigraphy and phasing in the main monograph are wrong! Now, what we are told we have from that site is a supposed Early Iron Age cremation cemetery, then a period of inhumation and cremation graves in the later Iron Age and then a late Roman Iron Age enclosure with lots of Roman-period material. But this reflects a now out-moded view of how burial developed in Ireland during later prehistory and the medieval period. In fact, what we probably have are two early medieval cremation burials, at least, and three dated inhumations

contemporary with those burials dating from the seventh century CE onwards. All of this is 50m or less from a church that is documented in the late twelfth century, but a church on the site is also perhaps referred to in the sixth-century *Chronicle of Ireland*, where the building called Tech Cerpanus – the church of Cerpanus (a British missionary) – is described to be located at Tara. I think this is very likely to be the church adjacent to the Rath of the Synods cemetery, with a quasi-churchyard developing around it during the seventh/eighth–eleventh/twelfth centuries. The easiest thing to explain this is the cemetery for a church that is immediately adjacent. If that is the case, then we also have two cremations at least that are stratigraphically contemporary with the early medieval inhumations, at a very high-profile site. So that's one site where generally there is more work needed but with regards to radiocarbon dating specifically there is not much that can be done here.

So, rather than focusing on this or any other one site, it would be better to examine the wider phenomenon and go back to archival assemblages, and even more recent discoveries from road schemes, to date this material as part of a systematic strategy without presuming a prehistoric date through culture-historical, ethnocentric narratives identified above re: pagan/Christian and immigrant/native.

FL: It seems to be a common theme that we are all struggling against culture-historic narratives in the early twenty-first century: it is bizarre how widespread these problems are, and we all want to use radiocarbon dates to help unpick this despite so many critiques.

PG: I think it goes to show that once we deconstruct the ethnic frameworks for migrations, we haven't done the knock-on analysis of the infrastructure within which our disciplines operate, and how these permeate every part of our frames of reference, from the analyses of religious beliefs right the way down to the nitty-gritty of stratigraphy and phasing. In terms of commercial archaeology, much going of our data comes from projects which systematically dated this material through comprehensive post-excavation strategies, but then didn't have the resource necessary to address the wider phenomenon and place these sites in context, because the remit of write-up and publication is single site based, or focused on a road-scheme within wider frameworks.

HW: I confess I'm guilty now that when I did a blog-post reviewing *The Last Kingdom* which has the funeral of a late ninth-century Cornish princess afforded a cremation ceremony in the presence of King Alfred the Great of Wessex, I mocked it (Williams 2018). I'm now going to have to eat my words aren't I (but see Lippok and Williams, this volume)?

FL: *The Last Kingdom* knew!

PG: I was the one who was sceptical and claimed 'there isn't much evidence about early medieval cremation' and then dialogue with my colleague McLaughlin and subsequent research showed that assertion was wrong.

HW: It shows we shouldn't be too dogmatic in our assertions as archaeologists as new fieldwork and new analyses shift and transform our understanding of the early medieval period. Sometimes we have to accept we are wrong!

PG: There is a serious requirement for a grant to systematically radiocarbon date cremations from around North West Europe. We have a brand-new machine delivered January 2021 to conduct radiocarbon dating and stable isotope analyses! It's a key aspect of future research at least!

FL: What new discoveries will change our understanding of early medieval cremations moving forward?

PG: I'm ashamed to admit I hadn't read much of the literature in archaeology more generally before I got interested in this topic. I was familiar with the work on cremation in an early medieval context, but broader methodological analyses I wasn't particularly familiar with. Jackie McKinley (2013) proposed for the need for systematic osteological analyses of cremated human bone and clearly it isn't happening or being taken seriously. And in terms of this material and other scientific methods including isotopic and radiocarbon dating – this is now standard and should be done and analysed by a specialist and a significant development in itself. This is a reality of the structures in which we operate and the material being found, it is too expensive to analyse it comprehensively. This is part of a problem with our funding models, more than the failings of specific researchers or commercial units.

The other point, is obviously the potential for isotopic analysis given recent transformations in the methods, looking at the way in which religious change might be seen in bioarchaeological and bio-geochemical methods examining the discoveries from Ireland in a broader North West European context. I would be really interested in long-term changes within cemeteries – including diet changes over time, and how this linked to cosmological structures, ideologies and commemorative strategies as impacted in terms of biology and diet. There was an interesting publication about a clear change in carbon and nitrogen isotopes in conversion period Anglo-Saxon England by Hannah *et al.* (2018), for example. The potential is there to apply this more broadly across cremation and inhumation burials. In an Irish context, I'm really interested to see if isotopic evidence could perceive

a difference between cremation and inhumation burials – perhaps there wouldn't be, but it would be interesting to see it across a long-term period rather than presuming a difference. But it is all about applying the right questions rather than simply looking for 'foreigners/immigrants'. I would like to see us think about other interesting questions than locality with isotope data, as sometimes isotopic analysis in Ireland has been fixated on mobility, overindulging again in that wider culture-historical framework. A lot of the isotopic work to date, for instance, has been looking at inhumation

burials that have been identified as 'Pictish' or 'Anglo-Saxon' in the 1990s, because they had unusual burial types, but the bio-geochemical signatures of these burials in fact suggest they have local signatures. Those mobility questions are very interesting but there must be more interesting and nuanced questions regarding diet and long-term changes in cemeteries that we can ask with these methods. Obviously, this work needs significant funding and large-scale assemblages that use incremental isotopic analyses, for instance, and I guess that is the challenge we face.

Key data: Ireland

Where do cremations occur in your research area?

In general cremations are found within defined cemeteries, burial monuments, or in multi-purpose complexes with defined funerary elements. Currently, there is a geographical bias in their distribution towards the east and north of the island of Ireland, but this is more likely a sampling and retrieval bias than a pattern of regional tradition.

In what quantities do cremations occur in your research area?

At the moment, the quantity of first-millennium CE cremations is still relatively small, with only thirty-five or so confirmed examples. The number is likely to be far higher, as there are issues with the post-excavation dating programmes that have tended not to select these samples for dating because of outmoded culture historical frameworks.

In what forms are cremations deposited in your research area? Are there any indications of pyres?

Evidence for pyres is extremely rare in Ireland, even in later prehistory, when cremation is the dominant form of burial and disposal of human remains. Cremations tend to be token deposits on the whole, and often within low burial mounds or ditches of barrows and ring-ditches. They have also been found in defined cemeteries that also contain inhumations in later centuries, and are sometimes associated with structures and other settlement debris within multi-functional complexes.

What types of containers are associated with cremations? (e.g. : urns, wooden containers, leather pouches?)

While we cannot rule out the possibility of organic containers which have left little or no trace, there is currently only very limited evidence for containers being used in Ireland. The only certain example is a cremation in a glass urn covered by a mirror, from the Late Roman Iron Age at Stoneyford Co. Kilkenny. This is generally interpreted as an exotic, Roman style

of burial, perhaps of an immigrant, though we should rightly be cautious of the culture-historical overtones of that assessment.

When objects occur with cremations, what type of objects are they? (do they tend to be burnt or unburnt?)

Objects can be found with cremations, but generally not in great quantities. These can be both burnt and unburnt, and by and large these are Roman Iron Age in date, and mainly dress ornaments (e.g. beads etc.). There is a very limited number of early medieval cremations with objects, the most striking of which is a probable human cremation from Ask, Co. Wexford, which had a cross-shaped mount placed atop the cremation pit (Figure 15.4).

Are there funerary monuments or other structures surrounding cremations in your research area?

Yes. Cremations can be found associated with monuments, but generally speaking those monuments do not tend to be associated with large cremation cemeteries. These are mostly small mounds and ring-ditches, as well as later slightly larger cemeteries with multi-functional complexes and often inhumations. The cremation deposits within these sites tend to be small, token, and often fairly limited in number, with a general absence of large numbers of burials.

Is there any noteworthy spatial patterning of cremation burials on the sites they occur on?

More research is required to address this, but there are some notable patterns in sites from the north of the island of Ireland, where the cremations may be associated with structures and other buildings within multi-functional contexts. They can, however, be found in defined cemetery areas too, and in close proximity to inhumation burials at a limited number of sites too.

What trends can be observed regarding the occurrence of cremation burials throughout time in your research area?

Because of the small sample size, it is still difficult to determine with certainty whether the patterns we see in the data are real

or skewed by small numbers of data points. Nevertheless, we do not seem to have a drop off in cremation from the fifth century CE associated with the conversion to Christianity. Instead, cremation appears to continue, perhaps as a minority rite and as late as the twelfth century CE on some sites. There is a peak in the seventh to ninth centuries CE, in terms of the numbers of dated cremations from this period, but it is not yet certain that the tapered decline of cremation after this point in our data is real, or an artefact of sample selection bias.

Where osteological data is available, is there any apparent selection of deceased according to their sex or age?

The analysis has not yet occurred to answer this question definitively.

What relationship existed between inhumation burials and cremation burials in your research area? Do they occur on the same site, or even in the same grave context?

In a limited number of cases, cremations and inhumation are known from the same site, and can now be demonstrated to have been contemporary modes of burial, rather than a sequence of burial practices. Currently, sites with both rituals are in a minority, but nevertheless seem to be broadly distributed, with little regional patterning, hinting that instead, both practices were viable and acceptable across a range of space and time. There are no sites where bi-ritual practices is certainly demonstrated, but there are cemeteries where cremation burials and inhumations have been recovered in close proximity. In some cases, namely older excavations, the archival data is not sufficient to accurately determine the exact proximity of these examples.

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Burning Questions: Learning to See Cremation in the Long Iron Age of Northern Britain

Adrián Maldonado

Direct evidence for cremation as a funerary rite in early medieval Scotland and northern England has historically been difficult to find, and remains under-reported in previous work, including by the author. However, early medieval cremated human remains deposited in significant locations, and often associated with prehistoric monuments, are increasingly being recognised through broader radiocarbon dating programmes. In the light of recent reassessments of the evidence from Scotland and Ireland, a new look at the data revealed several more examples. It is argued that these form a continuum with later prehistoric deposits of cremated human bone, and a 'long Iron Age' perspective is adopted to cut through the ideological baggage weighing down narratives of cremation in the archaeological literature around early medieval mortuary practice.

Early medieval, cremation, long Iron Age, fire, Scotland, Anglo-Saxon, Viking

The burial of cremated human remains became a key aspect of mortuary display in fifth and sixth-century southern and eastern England, but was considerably rarer in Northumbria (Lucy 1999; Williams 2002: 64–66, fig. 6). The northernmost 'mixed-rite' cemeteries (consisting of both cremation and inhumation burials with grave goods) are in Norton and Yarm, both on the Tees (Sherlock and Welch 1992). There is only scant evidence for the burial of cremated human remains north of these. Previous work on early medieval burial practices in Scotland and northern England by the author (Maldonado 2011; 2016) called cremation a 'minority rite' and stressed the unusual and largely undated nature of the kinds of deposits encountered. In many cases, they consist of relatively informal depositions of burnt human bone alongside other material; few occur in urns or other dedicated funerary vessels. Also, they are rarely accompanied with grave goods. Others have been tentatively identified through reassessment of antiquarian work, or by proxy evidence such as the presence of fire-damaged objects (e.g. Collins and Turner 2018; O'Sullivan 1996).

The discovery of cremated human bone, and possible pyres, dated to the early medieval period at Forteviot, Perthshire (discussed below) led to a reassessment of cremation practice amongst the Picts of north-east Scotland (Maldonado 2017; Campbell and Driscoll 2020). This was followed by new assessments of cremation in Ireland

(Gleeson and McLaughlin 2021; Gleeson, this volume) and a review of the evidence from western Scotland (Ó Ríagáin, this volume). Radiocarbon dating of material from archive collections continues to reveal new examples, and occasionally overturn old assumptions (as with Doon Hill, East Lothian, presumed to be an Anglo-Saxon timber hall and cemetery, now confirmed as Neolithic and Bronze Age: Ralston 2019). With the prompting of the editors of the current volume, a broader reassessment of the data turned up still more examples (Table 16.1).

It is clear now that the problem lies not with the archaeological data, but with our ways of reading it. Rather than an archaeology of early medieval cremation practice in Scotland and northern England (henceforth simply 'northern Britain'), this chapter highlights various ways in which cremated human bone entered the archaeological record. There does not appear to be a standard cremation rite to ascribe to a specific group, such as 'pagans', Picts or Vikings. And yet there are long-term patterns which emerge which require going beyond the chronological bounds of the early medieval period, in what has been called the 'long Iron Age'. It is also manifestly clear that we are still learning to see cremation in the north, but the investigation may have lessons for other areas as well.

Burning questions

Determining the extent of cremation of human remains in early medieval northern Britain hangs on two 'burning questions'. The first is simply about visibility. Recent reassessments of burnt human remains in Ireland and western Scotland, including new dates from legacy collections and unpublished grey literature, has revealed much higher than expected evidence for early medieval cremation (Gleeson and McLaughlin 2021; Gleeson, this volume; Ó Ríagáin, this volume). In many cases, deposits of burnt human bone were retrieved only through systematic sieving and sampling of contexts other than funerary, including ditches, grain pits and other scatters of burnt material. Bone preservation is generally poor in the acid soils of northern Britain more generally, and this will have a large effect on visibility regardless of excavation strategy.

Compared with southern and eastern Britain, where cremation of human remains became widespread in the fifth and sixth centuries, the evidence from northern Britain will always look sparse. Even in 'Anglo-Saxon' Northumbria, there is an overall lower density of burial sites of any kind compared with Britain south of the Humber (Lucy 1999; Williams 2002). North of the modern border with Scotland, in the area with the greatest density of burial evidence, the Lothian plain, there is no certain evidence for cremation other than poorly documented antiquarian reports of burnt remains (Maldonado 2011: 107). Henshall (1956: 268) has shown how in south-eastern Scotland, early medieval burial in stone cists is frequently found alongside

Bronze Age cists, and any or all of these references may be mistaking or conflating encounters with prehistoric burial activity (see also Annaert, this volume). Given the intensity of development and archaeological reporting of finds in the Lothian area, the broadly negative evidence for cremation should thus be taken to be indicative of real absence of cremation burial as a common funerary rite.

However, the low overall density of burial evidence from north and west of the Forth in Scotland strongly suggests that other forms of mortuary practice, including cremation and exposure, were used more regularly (Shapland and Armit 2012: 100–103). If so, the funerary process in much of northern Britain did not normally culminate in the burial of the remains in a way that is archaeologically visible. This poses a challenge for any attempt to characterise cremation practices in this area.

The second, more hotly 'burning question' around the extent of early medieval cremation in the north is whether its relative infrequency can be read as a conscious rejection of it as a deviant, taboo or otherwise less desirable funerary practice. Contemporary archaeological discourse around early medieval cremation is often pitched as a historiographical culture war between pagans and Christians, or Anglo-Saxons and Romano-Britons, in which cremation is seen as a partisan act. Revisiting the data in contemporary historical and archaeological contexts, cremation should now be seen as one among many types of funerary commemoration available in the early medieval period, the deployment of which is heavily contingent and localised (Content and Williams 2010: 193–194; Lippok 2020: 149–151; Gleeson and McLaughlin 2021: 395; Effros 1997). As will become clear below, there is no real sense that cremation was ever part of a shared and coherent ideology in northern Britain after the Bronze Age.

The chronology for cremation is also somewhat different in the north than elsewhere in Britain. Cremation remained in use as late as the fourth century CE in the cemeteries of the Roman militarised zone to either side of Hadrian's Wall, despite having fallen out of fashion by this point elsewhere in the province of Britannia (Caruana 2004; Cool 2004; Charlton and Mitcheson 1984; Hair and Howard-Davis 1996). Outside of these frontier civilian and military cemeteries, cremation was always rare in northern Britain. Instead, instances of burnt human remains are so scattered and diverse in the northern Iron Age that it would be difficult to apply to them any specific ethnic or religious significance moving into the fifth and sixth centuries, much less any form of continuity from a 'pagan' past into the Christian era. It is clear there are other, site-specific factors at play which tell us little if anything about religious dogma, and more about embedded knowledge, cosmology and ways of dwelling in an animated, antecedent landscape.

In order to capture these variations in practice, which are widespread but discontinuous, it will be necessary

Table 16.1 (and following pages): List of sites with evidence of burnt bone from northern Britain. The Historic Environment Scotland's online Canmore database ID is provided for all Scottish sites. All radiocarbon dates have been recalibrated to 95% probability range using OxCal v.4.4.4 (IntCal20 calibration curve)

County	Name (Canmore ID)	Type	Reference	C14 dates (cal BP)	Cal date 2σ	Dated material	Grid reference
Aberdeenshire	Waulkmill (17039)	Cremations in mixed-rite Iron Age cemetery	Bradley and Nimura 2016	SUERC-44435, 1802 +/- 29 SUERC-44434, 1673 +/- 29	135-345 CE 255-530 CE	Human bone Human bone	NJ 4753 0499
Aberdeenshire	Auchmill (19233)	Burnt deposits in long cist; antiquarian report only	Maldonado 2011				NJ 723 561
Argyll	Baliscate, Mull (22086)	Fire pit in prehistoric stone row	Ó Riagáin, this volume	SUERC-11988, 1180 +/- 35	710-975 CE	Charcoal	NM 4996 5413
Argyll	Cleigh, Kilmore (22896)	Cremation deposit in prehistoric cairn	Ó Riagáin, this volume	AA-29766, 1385 +/- 55	570-775 CE	Charcoal	NM 8785 2570
Argyll	Ardnave, Islay (238957)	Pyre eroding from sand dune	Ó Riagáin, this volume	SUERC-1673, 1170 +/- 45	710-990 CE	Oak	NR 2960 7290
Argyll	Acharn, Morvern (22480)	Cremation in Bronze Age short cist	Ritchie and Thornber 1989	GU-2070, 1825 +/- 80	25-410 CE	Charcoal	NM 697 505
Argyll	Sanaighmor, Islay (138297)	Urned cremations	Cook 2000	AA-26243, 2300 +/- 50 AA-26244, 1655 +/- 50	510-200 BCE 255-545 CE	Human bone Human bone	NR 2405 7085
Argyll	Dunstaffnage (312128)	Iron Age cremations disturbed by early medieval settlement?	Ellis 2016	SUERC-44886, 1253 +/- 33 SUERC-44888, 1197 +/- 33 SUERC-44898, 1257 +/- 33 SUERC-44899, 1193 +/- 33	670-880 CE 705-950 CE 670-875 CE 705-955 CE	Alnus Corylus Corylus Corylus	NM 87878 34063
Buteshire	Kingscross Point, Arran (40078)	Cremation with Viking-age grave goods	Ó Riagáin, this volume	SUERC-85219, 1185 +/- 24	770-945 CE	Human bone	NS 05590 28255
Berwickshire	Addinston (56027)	Burnt deposits in long cists; antiquarian report only	Maldonado 2011				NT 519 523
Berwickshire	Nether Howden (56059)	Burnt deposits in long cist; antiquarian report only	Maldonado 2011				NT 500 530
Berwickshire	Hare Law (57339)	Burnt deposits in long cists; antiquarian report only	Maldonado 2011				NT 645 485
Cumbria	Crosby Garrett	Cremation and grave goods in cairn; antiquarian report only	O'Sullivan 1996				NY 706 067
Cumbria	Kirkby Stephen	Cremation under barrow; antiquarian report only	O'Sullivan 1996				NY 770 066
Cumbria	Warcop	Cremation and grave goods in cairn; antiquarian report only	O'Sullivan 1996				NY 733 171
Durham	Norton-on-Tees	Cremations in Anglo-Saxon mixed-rite cemetery	Sherlock and Welch 1992				NZ 449 226
East Lothian	Pencreig Hill (249181)	Cremated bone in cist	Innes 2008	SUERC-7665, 2050 +/- 35	165 BCE - 60 CE	Human bone	NT 568 763

County	Name (Canmore ID)	Type	Reference	C14 dates (cal BP)	Cal date 2σ	Dated material	Grid reference
East Lothian	Eweford West (257432)	Cremated bone in cist	Innes 2008	SUERC-5287, 2395 +/- 40	750-390 BCE	Human bone	NT 66370 77370
East Lothian	Knowes (57720)	Cremated bone in cist	Haselgrove <i>et al.</i> 2009	SUERC-10579, 2305 +/- 35	415-210 BCE	Human bone	NT 61452 77579
East Lothian	Phantassie (249183)	Cremated bone in cist and associated settlement	Lelong 2008	SUERC-10571, 2405 +/- 35	745-400 BCE	Human bone	NT 5961 7688
Fife	Hallow Hill, St Andrews (32900)	Burnt deposits in cist grave with Roman-era objects	Proudfoot 1997				NO 4930 1565
Inverness-shire	Balnaran of Clava (14277)	Cremated bone and charcoal deposit in prehistoric cairn	Bradley 2000	AA-21258, 1445 +/- 130 AA-21259, 1290 +/- 195	265-885 CE 380-1165 CE	Betula Corylus	NH 7571 4443
Inverness-shire	Udal, North Uist (10319)	'Cremation platform' and burnt bone from multiperiod settlement; undated	Campbell 2000				NF 8242 7843
Inverness-shire	Pityoulish (15389)	Fire pits associated with Pictish square barrow grave	Rae and Rae 1955				NH 93166 15286
Lanarkshire	Hyndshaw (46700)	Burnt deposits in long cists; antiquarian report only	Maldonado 2011				NS 844 535
Midlothian	Catstane (50730)	Burnt deposits in short cist; antiquarian report only	Cowie 1978				NT 1492 7432
Midlothian	Graves Knowes (49069)	Burnt deposits in long cists; antiquarian report only	Maldonado 2011				NT 041 666
Midlothian	Rullion Green (51914)	Cemetery of cremation deposits on ditched barrows	Matt Knight, pers comm	SUERC-109053, 2527 +/- 25	790-545 BCE	Human bone	NT 2209 6224
Moray	Easterton of Roseisle (16255)	Burnt deposits in cist with reused Pictish symbol stone	Maldonado 2011				NJ 144 648
North Yorkshire	Yarm	Cremations in Anglo-Saxon mixed-rite cemetery	Lucy 1999				NZ 421 117
Northumberland	High Knowes, Alnham	Pyre with Roman Iron Age pin	Jobey and Tait 1966				NT 9675 1215
Northumberland	Eslington	Stray finds of Anglo-Saxon objects, some fire-damaged	Collins and Turner 2018				NU 0358 1288
Orkney	Oxtro Broch (1789)	Cremation urn capped with possible Pictish symbol stone (lost)	Ashmore 2003				HY 2537 2678
Orkney	Stromness (1495)	Cremation in steatite urn wrapped in deer hide	Sheridan <i>et al.</i> 2005	GrA-24015, 1585 +/- 40 GrA-24198, 1620 +/- 40	415-565 CE 365-555 CE	Human bone Human bone	HY 25 09
Orkney	Hermisgarth, Sanday (80454)	Pyre settings and Pictish inhumation graves including one with partially cremated human bone	Downes and Morris 1997				HY 6627 4288

County	Name (Canmore ID)	Type	Reference	C14 dates (cal BP)	Cal date 2σ	Dated material	Grid reference
Peebles-shire	Broughton Knowe (48590)	Disturbed cremation deposit on a ditched barrow	MacLaren 1968				NT 0984 3962
Perthshire	Forteviot (314691)	Pyre pit and pits with burnt grain and human bone in and around prehistoric funerary monuments	Campbell and Driscoll 2020	SUERC-37895, 1595 +/- 35 SUERC-37896, 1615 +/- 35 SUERC-45558, 1287 +/- 29 SUERC-45559, 1233 +/- 29 SUERC-37761, 1350 +/- 30 SUERC-37762, 1255 +/- 30 SUERC-37753, 1145 +/- 30 SUERC-37757, 1085 +/- 30	415-555 CE 400-550 CE 660-800 CE 680-885 CE 640-775 CE 670-875 CE 775-990 CE 890-1020 CE	Corylus Hordeum vulgare Human bone Human bone Alnus Corylus Corylus Hordeum vulgare	NO 0524 1701
Perthshire	Hallhole (28475)	Square ditched barrow with burnt deposits	Maldonado 2011				NO 1862 3908
Perthshire	North Mains of Strathallan (26006)	?Prehistoric burnt bone in early medieval grave fills	Barclay 1983				NN 9285 1625
Shetland	Uyea (1417)	Cremation in steatite urn (undated) capped with Pictish symbol stone	Sheridan 2003				HU 6004 9934
Shetland	Uyea (1418)	Cremation in steatite urn	Sheridan 2003	GrA-21621, 2480 +/- 60	775-415 BCE	Human bone	HU 6004 9934
Shetland	St Ninian's Isle (587)	Undated burnt bone in cist burials	Barrowman 2011				HU 3685 2090
Sutherland	Rhiconich (4702)	Hearth of hut circle reused as possible pyre	Driscoll 1998	GU-4245, 1530 +/- 60	420-640 CE	Charcoal	NC 2517 5213
Sutherland	Golspie (6569)	Burnt deposits with early medieval clay moulds in reused Bronze Age cist	Knight and Maldonado 2022	SUERC-101727, 1510 +/- 28	440-640 CE	Charcoal	NC 8344 0030
Wigtownshire	High Torrs, Luce Sands (61221)	Bustum cremation burial with Roman grave goods	Breeze and Ritchie 1980				NX 141 556
Wigtownshire	Whithorn Glebe Field (63298)	Cremation deposit outside early medieval burial chapel	Hill 1997; this chapter	SUERC-84894, 1228 +/- 24 SUERC-84895, 1217 +/- 22 SUERC-84896, 1282 +/- 24 SUERC-84897, 1317 +/- 24	690-885 CE 705-885 CE 665-775 CE 655-775 CE	Human bone Human bone Human bone Animal bone	NX 44476 40313
Wigtownshire	Whithorn Priory (63298)	Burnt deposits in later medieval cemetery	Lowe 2009				NX 44476 40313

to take a broad view of northern Britain as comprising Scotland as well as northern England (from the Tees in the east and Cumbria in the west). But for a few key settlements, Roman cremation rituals were short-lived and localised in northern Britain, and so will not be considered in detail here. In much of northern Britain, burial evidence is sparse throughout the first millennium, with the most obvious archaeological change being the establishment of enclosed Christian burial grounds, and the appearance of dressed and accompanied burials associated with the Viking Age, both manifesting largely from c. 800 CE onward (Harding 2016; Ashmore 2003). This chapter will therefore focus mainly on the period before these changes. Despite covering a variety of landscapes and ecologies, there are continuities of burial practice across northern Britain which are worth studying together. Therefore, we can apply a 'long Iron Age' approach and consider the scattered evidence for the disposal of burnt human remains across the first millennium CE more broadly before putting the early medieval evidence into greater focus.

'Formal' deposits of burnt human remains in the long Iron Age

There is growing evidence for cremation throughout the first millennium CE in northern Britain. Very few are in 'formal' deposits, that is, in a dedicated funerary context. At Waulkmill, Aberdeenshire, several pits were cut into and around an early prehistoric stone circle for the deposition of human remains. One was in the centre of the cairn of the stone circle, where an earlier pit was recut to take a deposit of burnt human bone dated cal. 255–530 CE. A second small pit containing burnt human remains was encountered outside the stone circle, dated cal. 135–345 CE (Bradley *et al.* 2016: 27–55).

While these small pits were not elaborate, and the human remains unaccompanied, they were not the only funerary deposits in this prehistoric monument. Roman Iron Age objects, including a silver penannular brooch and gaming pieces, were found in the late nineteenth century, in one case associated with unburnt bones in a cist. The excavations which revealed the two cremation deposits also turned up two further inhumation graves outside the stone circle, in close proximity to the outer cremation. One of these inhumations was furnished with a Roman Iron Age penannular brooch and a set of gaming pieces similar to the nineteenth-century finds. This prehistoric monument had therefore been reused in the early first millennium as a 'mixed rite' cemetery of at least five graves, with one cremation deposit cut straight into its centre and the rest just beyond the edge of the cairn and stone circle. The radiocarbon dates of the cremation deposits overlap, and the date of the objects from the inhumations suggests they could all have been made over a very short period of time in the late second/early third century CE.

While there is a clear difference between the inhumations and cremations, in that the latter were unaccompanied, only a quarter of the site was subject to controlled excavation, and the sample size is therefore too small to generalise. Regardless, none of these deposits were particularly ostentatious in terms of the value or variety of objects; it is the location and wider context which is most significant. As simple as they are, these burials together represent the clearest example of a space set aside for funerary activity at this time.

Waulkmill represents just one among many kinds of engagement with the distinctive megalithic monuments of north-east Scotland. In a flurry of activity beginning in the Roman Iron Age and continuing into the early medieval period, this regional cluster of cairns, stone circles and standing stones attracted bonfires, burials, silver hoards and the marking of monoliths with Pictish symbols (Bradley and Nimura 2016: 20–21, 130–133; Noble *et al.* 2016). Similar cremation deposits and fire pits are found associated with other megalithic constructions which blur the boundary between funerary and other ritual activity. For instance, the Bronze Age ring-cairn of Balnuaran of Clava had a cremation deposit of similar date spread beneath a setting of flat slabs, set into the space between the edge of the cairn and a surrounding stone circle (Bradley 2000: 56–58, 115). Without radiocarbon dating, the fire pits and cremation deposits at these cairns would have been dismissed as prehistoric activity.

A related situation pertains in East Lothian, which uniquely in northern Britain has abundant evidence for Iron Age burial activity, but where cremation remains a rarity (Armit *et al.* 2013). In three of four sites where cremation deposits were dated (see Appendix), they were within cists specially built for them, but always cut into more ancient monuments: in one case, at the Iron Age enclosure of Knowes, human remains dated to the Early Iron Age were redeposited in a cist built in the early first millennium CE (Innes 2008; Haselgrove *et al.* 2009: 91–97; Armit *et al.* 2013: 96). Unlike in north-east Scotland, cremation in south-east Scotland seems to have ended at the turn of the first millennium, with inhumation and deposition of unburnt human remains being the norm thereafter.

Elsewhere, in Atlantic-facing parts of Scotland, there is only very scattered evidence for 'formal' deposits of cremated human bone (see Ó Ríagáin, this volume). It is most often the case that early prehistoric funerary architecture was 'reoccupied' in the first millennium, including the possible reuse of a Bronze-Age short cist in Acharn, Morvern (Ritchie and Thornber 1989). Clearer evidence comes from two prehistoric urns which were repurposed at Sanaighmor, Islay. A short cist containing a Bronze-Age ceramic urn included burnt remains dated to cal. 255–545 CE (Cook 2000: 259–260, 265–266). A second



Figure 16.1: Fragment of carved stone found reused as a lid for an urned cremation deposit at Uyea, Shetland. 55mm x 110mm. National Museums Scotland X.IB 18 (Image reproduced with kind permission of the Trustees of National Museums Scotland)

urn from the same site, this time in a circular stake-lined pit, had its contents dated to the Early Iron Age. There remains a remote possibility that these urns were Iron-Age copies of older forms, but the lack of Iron-Age parallels for such fabric led the excavator and ceramic specialist to agree that reuse of Bronze-Age vessels was more likely in both cases.

The separation of these two episodes of reuse on Islay by nearly a millennium was seen as a remarkable coincidence, but a similar phenomenon has been noted in Shetland. An early medieval cremation in an ancient vessel is the likeliest explanation for a fragment of Pictish carved stone reused as a lid for an urn containing burnt bone at Uyea, Shetland (National Museums Scotland [NMS] X.IB 18, acquired in 1868; Figure 16.1); sadly the organic deposits were not retained. At least one other Bronze Age steatite urn from Uyea had been reused for a cremation in the Early Iron Age (Sheridan 2003). The carved stone used as an urn lid is a rare form of monument carved on both sides with designs incorporating spirals, possibly dating to the seventh century CE (Ritchie 2018). The act of fragmentation for reuse as an urn lid suggests violence, perhaps a symbolic upheaval of existing power structures, as has been argued for a similar fragment of carved stone found in a presumed Viking Age cist at Oxtro Broch, Orkney (Ashmore 2003; Hedges 1983: 120). However, there are numerous examples of Pictish fragmentation and reuse of carved stones (Clarke 2007: 29–30), so we need not invoke Viking raiders here to explain these deposits.

While the above examples of urned cremation all appear to have been in reused prehistoric vessels, it is possible that some represent a previously unsuspected early medieval tradition of creating steatite urns for cremation deposits in the Northern Isles. At Stromness, Orkney, an eighteenth-century intervention into a ‘tumulus’ revealed a steatite urn wrapped in deerskin placed in a short cist under a cairn. It is not clear whether this was a reused prehistoric urn and cist, or whether this

was an early medieval ‘recreation’ of an early form of burial; the vessel was not obviously of Bronze-Age type, nor does it fit into the early medieval series of steatite vessels made in Orkney, and the word ‘tumulus’ could refer to anything from a barrow to a ruined settlement mound (Hugo Anderson-Whymark, pers. comm.). The burnt contents of the urn were dated as part of a broader project to establish a chronology of prehistoric cremation practices. The seemingly anomalous early medieval result was confirmed with a second sample, which was nearly identical: cal. 365–555 CE and cal. 415–565 CE (Sheridan *et al.* 2005).

The only other site where ceramic cremation urns may have been used is St Ninian’s Isle, Shetland, but the poorly preserved remains make it difficult to prove (Barrowman 2011). The site has a long sequence beginning with an Iron Age settlement sealed by a midden layer, which was then cut into by a series of stone cists of a variety of forms, and finally becoming a medieval chapel. Several of the early cist burials were said to have contained sherds of ceramic ‘urns’. One (cist A) was described in 1957 as being paved with quartz pebbles and filled with burnt bone, while another (cist B) also contained burnt bone and ceramic. Sadly, neither the bone nor the sherds survive, and so they cannot be verified as human remains or dated. These were found at a similar depth to a complex of adjoining cists, covered by a rubble cairn, excavated in 1959. A flexed, prone inhumation at the centre of this cairn and cist complex was thought to be Bronze Age, but was later radiocarbon-dated to the seventh/eighth century CE. As such, despite the use of short cists, flexed inhumation and possibly cremation, all redolent of prehistoric burial practices, there is no reliable evidence for human burial of any kind at St Ninian’s Isle earlier than the seventh century CE, and tantalising reports of burnt bone and cremation urns within short cists here cannot be confirmed. Further evidence of possible later medieval cremation at St Ninian’s Isle is discussed below.

The place of cremation in the long Iron Age

All of the above deposits represent the culmination of funerary rituals which involved the burning of human remains, but the pyre sites themselves have not been found. With the exception of Roman military and civilian *bustum* graves where the body is cremated *in situ* (e.g. Breeze and Ritchie 1980), very few pyres are known from northern Britain in the first millennium CE. A frequently cited example is Alnham, Northumberland, where among the Bronze Age cairns was a pyre in a square-kerbed setting, with burnt remains including a projecting ring-headed pin dating to the early centuries CE (Jobey and Tait 1966: 25–33). Without the pin, this setting would have been seen as Bronze Age like the surrounding monuments. Formal deposits of cremations in annular cairns have recently been dated to the Early Iron Age at Rullion Green, Midlothian (Matthew Knight, pers. comm.), and it is possible that more formal cremation deposits remain to be identified amongst the many unexcavated cropmark ring-ditches and mounds in the region. In light of the long-term revisitation of cairnfields at Uyea and Sanaighmor, it is notable that the long-lived burial place at Alnham was revisited as a place for Iron Age cremation.

The hearth of a Bronze-Age hut circle in Rhiconich, Sutherland was reused as a possible cremation pyre, radiocarbon dated to the fifth to seventh century CE (Driscoll 1998: 148). An Iron Age ‘cremation platform’ has been suggested at the unpublished excavations at the Udal, North Uist, but on uncertain evidence; burnt human remains have been identified at this multi-period settlement, but remain undated (Campbell 2000: 190; Armit and Ginn 2007: 125).

In this context, the deposits from Hermisgarth, Sanday, Orkney are highly significant. The remains of at least three cremation pyres were found near what is an otherwise ‘normal’ early medieval inhumation cemetery of small platform cairns (Downes and Morris 1997). Both the pyres and cairns were linked stratigraphically between layers of blown sand inundation; they were treated by the excavators as broadly coeval. Only one unburnt skeleton was dated, an adult female beneath a cairn, returning a broad date range from the third to the seventh centuries CE. As at Alnham, the pyre settings were superficially similar to the adjacent cairns, defined by rectilinear kerbs of upright stones. The best-preserved example was a rectilinear kerb with paved interior, reminiscent of a Pictish square cairn without the upper infill of cobbles as seen at Lundin Links, Fife (e.g. Greig *et al.* 2000: 593–594). However, at Hermisgarth they were identified as pyres through the scorching of the paving slabs and traces of burnt human bone. Geophysical survey revealed that further cists and cairns extended north up the coast, toward what may have been a prehistoric chambered cairn.

Intriguingly, one of the excavated cists in the cemetery at Hermisgarth contained a child of three to four years who had been partly cremated, with only the cranium successfully burnt, blurring the boundaries between inhumation and cremation. It also helps demonstrate that the burial cairns were indeed contemporary with the pyres, despite the lack of independent dating evidence for the latter. Another possible pyre from the Pictish assembly place of Forteviot, Perthshire, contemporary with Hermisgarth, is discussed below. A final pyre site of likely Viking-Age date, and therefore technically beyond the scope of this chapter, from Ardnave, Islay is discussed by Ó Riagáin (this volume; Ashmore 2004: 159).

Other uses of burnt human bone

The reuse of ancient monuments, particularly barrows and cairns, is a well-documented phenomenon across early medieval north-western Europe, but one not limited only to funerary events (Williams 1997, Driscoll 1998, Thäte 2007, Semple 2013). There are several antiquarian accounts of burnt deposits from inhumation burials which are of dubious value, but there are now numerous examples from controlled excavations which show that prehistoric cremated bone was indeed encountered during episodes of later monument reuse. At North Mains of Strathallan, Perthshire, thirteen inhumations were inserted into a henge, disturbing a Bronze Age cremation cemetery (Barclay 1983: 145). At least three of these early medieval graves incorporated cremated bone in their fills, which the excavators reasonably interpreted as residual. However, it is worth exploring the encounter with the ancient dead and the range of effects it could have.

Cremated human remains were not only deposited in funerary contexts. Even in formal cremation deposits, it is commonly observed that only a token amount of the bone from the cadaver was used (McKinley 1994; Williams 2004: 281–282; Bradley *et al.* 2016: 52–53). Deposits of under 100g of cremated bone represent less than 10% of the expected remains from an adult cadaver, and should perhaps be considered as something more akin to modern practices of scattering cremains at locations of biographical significance to the dead (McKinley 2013: 154–155). The weight of burnt bone is not consistently recorded in published accounts, but it means that many, if not most, of the deposits described here will have a broad spectrum of meanings not limited to the ‘final resting place’ of the deceased. While a portion of the remains was retained for meaningful deposition within antecedent monuments, the rest were treated in ways which leave no archaeological trace.

In northern Britain, the partition of burnt human remains complements evidence for the fragmentation of the human body as seen in deposits of disarticulated unburnt bone across the long Iron Age, particularly in

Atlantic Scotland (Armit and Ginn 2007; Shapland and Armit 2012; Harding 2016: 6–7). It indicates there was an appreciation of the partibility of human remains regardless of whether the bones were burnt or unburnt. This raises implications for our understanding of the personhood of the dead in the long Iron Age that still needs further discussion (Maldonado 2011: 114–17; 2016: 52–53).

In the northern Iron Age, remains of the dead were not always segregated into dedicated spaces or ‘formal’ deposits, but integrated into daily life in various ways (Harding 2016: 9–11, 120). In a time when only few people were afforded formal burial, it is a mistake to assume that human remains were always used as a medium of remembrance, or treated with reverence (Cooper *et al.* 2020; Büster 2021). The question is whether these patterns of thought persisted into the early medieval period, as studies of depositional practices in Anglo-Saxon and contemporary Scandinavian contexts have suggested (Gansum 2004; Hamerow 2006; Morris and Jervis 2011: 68–70).

An instructive example of non-funerary treatment of commingled burnt human remains, even if beyond the chronological scope of the current paper, comes from Phantassie, East Lothian. Ploughsoil and midden material in a rural farmstead contained cremated human bone belonging to as many as sixty individuals dated to the Early Iron Age (Lelong 2008: 195–197). It is likely that burnt human remains were retained, or reused, for the purpose of manuring the soil. A potential early medieval example was identified at Dunstaffnage, Argyll, where burnt human remains (in two cases mixed with burnt animal bone) were encountered in the pits and postholes associated with a small farmstead built in the seventh to the ninth centuries CE (Ellis 2016). The early medieval farmstead was adjacent to an earlier Iron Age settlement, with early medieval pits inserted in line with a row of Iron Age fire pits. None of the material dated was from human bone, however, so it remains inconclusive whether cremated bone was residual prehistoric material, or contemporary with the early medieval settlement.

A parallel phenomenon was noted at Forteviot, Perthshire, where flecks of cremated bone were encountered across several interventions (Campbell and Driscoll 2020: 92, 119). The assumption was that these were displaced from prehistoric burials through plough action, but a comprehensive radiocarbon dating programme soon proved otherwise.

At Forteviot, early medieval inhumations, primarily in round and square barrows, grew up around the edges of a prehistoric monument complex which must have remained visible as earthworks (Maldonado 2017; Campbell and Driscoll 2020: 67–94). In several instances, there were remnants of commemorative activity involving burning, and potentially fire rituals, as indicated by fire

pits adjacent to barrows, a charred log coffin, and the deposition of burnt wood into grave fills.

However, burnt human remains were only encountered away from these inhumation burials, within the prehistoric monument complex itself. Here, the interiors of several Neolithic and Bronze Age cairns and henges had been robbed out in the first millennium CE, leaving large pits. In the spaces between these monuments, further large pits had been backfilled mainly with burnt grain, allowing them to be dated to at least three discrete episodes from the fourth to the eleventh centuries CE.

At least one Bronze Age burial at Forteviot was disturbed by early medieval activity. A rare triple-chamber within a ring-ditched enclosure was confirmed by radiocarbon dating to have been constructed in the Early Bronze Age, but its central chamber was later filled with a secondary deposit of burnt oats and barley mingled with burnt human bone (Figure 16.2). These intrusive deposits were dated to the fourth to sixth centuries CE, matching dates from another grain pit outside the enclosure. All this suggests an event in which an ancient burial monument was reopened in a context which also involved large bonfires and offerings of grain, and the burning of human remains.

The dating suggests this could have happened in a period before the widespread acceptance of Christianity in this area; the earliest Christian carved stones from Forteviot date to the ninth century. However, burnt human bone and hazel charcoal from one of these bonfire pits returned dates from the seventh to the ninth centuries, coinciding with the production of Christian sculpture overlooking the prehistoric monument complex (Campbell and Driscoll 2020: 129–170). In this case, the deposit was of material burnt *in situ*, and was interpreted by the excavators as a pyre. Another pit of similar form dated to the ninth to eleventh centuries had much less burnt human bone, which was well abraded, and therefore likely residual (Campbell and Driscoll 2020: 84–85).

Unlike the other sites investigated above, at Forteviot there is a potential argument for continuity of cremation practice from a pre-Christian to a Christian context. However, there is no clear parallel for rituals combining cremation with the large-scale burning of grain elsewhere in Scotland. Instead of an ideologically ‘pagan’ ritual, we should understand these as innovative ceremonies developed for this specific site, perhaps as late as the fourth to sixth centuries CE, as part of the reoccupation of an ancient monument complex in the early medieval period.

The use of burnt human remains at Forteviot, a major royal centre and assembly place in the early medieval period, is materially different from that at Iron Age Phantassie, a rural farmstead. At the latter, the character of the evidence could have been a pragmatic soil-enrichment strategy, though we should not so quickly divorce the ‘logic’ of subsistence from the ‘ritual’ of a large bonfire



Figure 16.2: A Bronze Age triple-cist in a ring-ditched mound from Forteviot, Perthshire, the central chamber of which was reused for a deposit of burnt grains and human bone dated to the early medieval period (Image reproduced with kind permission of Stephen Driscoll, University of Glasgow)

ceremony. Both can be interpreted as rituals of fertility, a mobilisation of the materiality of the cadaver into rituals of regeneration, in lifeways structured around the agrarian seasonal cycle (Bloch and Parry 1982; Hingley 1993: 11, 39; M. Williams 2003: 237–238). It is in the context of royal assemblies at prehistoric monuments, a phenomenon largely of the long Iron Age in Ireland and Scotland, that rituals linking social reproduction and the sacrifice of food became particularly salient (Maldonado 2017: 339). Forteviot, like its Irish counterpart at Tara, Co. Meath, also incorporated cremated human remains into these ceremonies well into the Christian period (Gleeson and McLaughlin 2021: 385, 391).

Fire and transformation

It is clear then that the retention and deposition of burnt human bone in early medieval northern Britain does not conform to a single ritual process or ideology, and must instead be understood within a wider context of fire rituals and deposition of burnt remains of various kinds. Complex rituals including the cremation of animals (as at Sollas, North Uist: Campbell 2000) and ritualised deposition of ash (as at An Dunan, Lewis:

Church *et al.* 2013) have been identified around the turn of the first millennium BCE/CE in the Hebrides. There is often little distinction between the use of burnt human and animal bone in such deposits; once rendered into calcined remains, they can become an important substance appropriate for use in a variety of rituals of transformation (Cooper *et al.* 2020: 152–154).

There is a surprising lack of theoretical engagement with the deployment of fire itself in early medieval thought-worlds (Williams 2004; cf. Wright 2021). However, circumstantial evidence for commemorative activity involving fire has already been noted above in the case of Forteviot. This may help explain the presence of intrusive early medieval ‘fire-pits’ cut into prehistoric monuments such as the cairn at Tarland, Aberdeenshire (Bradley and Nimura 2016: 20–21, 132) or the rock-art panel at Torbhlaren 2 near Kilmichael Glassary, Argyll (Jones *et al.* 2011: 120). Fire-pits and burnt soil horizons, sometimes containing burnt animal bone, have been noted at several cemetery sites in Scotland (Rae and Rae 1953: 156; Henshall 1956: 259–260; Cowie 1978: 183; Proudfoot 1997: 413–414). Deposits of burnt deposits of various kinds, from grain to human and animal bone, have been found in

funerary contexts in Ireland from the fourth to the tenth centuries (O'Brien 2020, 62, 68–69, 77–78, 128–130).

This then calls to mind several other funerary contexts which incorporate burnt remains, tending to occur in rather unusual circumstances. A stone cist under a cairn from the early medieval cemetery of Hallow Hill, St Andrews, Fife was an unusually elaborate construction (Proudfoot 1997: 413–414). It remains undated but contained diagnostically late Roman material culture (second to fourth centuries CE). The lower tier of the cist contained unburnt disarticulated human remains of a child of five years mingled with burnt and unburnt animal bone, with Roman objects in a possible purse. In an upper tier separated by a paving slab, an 'orange soil' contained burnt and unburnt animal bone. It was argued that this special burial formed the focus for the early medieval cemetery.

Other cist burials from Scotland, including Easterton of Roseisle, Moray and Addinston, Berwickshire, reportedly had similar mixed deposits of burnt and unburnt human remains, but these only come via antiquarian accounts of varying reliability and it is not always possible to prove that the burnt remains included human bone (Henshall 1956: 268; Walker 1968; Maldonado 2011, 106–109; see Table 16.1). The cist from Easterton contained a Pictish symbol stone as a side slab and may represent a prehistoric monument modified in the early medieval period. This stone had been re-carved and reused several times, its multiple lives adding to the suggestion of sustained engagement with ancient monuments (Clarke 2007), giving a plausible context for the encounter with ancient funerary deposits.

A related deposit comes from a short cist from Golspie, Sutherland. The Bronze Age cist was reopened for the deposition of charcoal, burnt animal bone, moulds for non-ferrous metalworking (Figure 16.3) and a pumice pendant (Woodham and Mackenzie 1957). The crouched inhumation, seemingly left intact during this intervention, was confirmed as dating to the Late Bronze Age, while charcoal from the later insertion has now been dated to the fifth to seventh centuries CE (Sheridan *et al.* 2006, 201; Knight and Maldonado 2022). While these deposits may not have included burnt human remains, the deposition of objects and burnt remains in reused prehistoric cists links them with the cremation deposits described above.

Nevertheless, the co-occurrence of burnt animal and human bone is frequently encountered in Iron Age and early medieval cremation deposits (Williams 2004: 267–277; Harding 2016: 254; Gleeson and McLaughlin 2021: 396; Löffelmann *et al.* 2023). It is highly likely therefore that there was considerable overlap in the treatment of burnt human and animal bone in funerary contexts, and that some of the above antiquarian reports may indeed relate to burnt deposits added into cist burials in the early

medieval period. In the case of Golspie, we begin to shade into the associations between metalworking and death as complementary practices of transformation by fire which introduce still more potential for non-funerary uses of burnt deposits, including human and animal remains (Gansum 2004: 51–52). An association with ancient monuments remains salient throughout, and indeed, in several examples, the graves containing burnt material also incorporated heirlooms and other material taken out of their usual contexts. The context, then, may be determinant of the medium of the deposit.

Implications for Viking-Age cremations

While the reappearance of 'formal' cremation burials to northern Britain in the Viking Age falls beyond the remit of the current paper, it is worth briefly raising some implications for future work. Because of the ideological baggage that cremation has accrued in the discourse of early medieval funerary archaeology, it is tempting to link cremation with a pagan Old Norse worldview when it appears in contexts dated to the ninth and tenth centuries. However, it is notable just how rare cremation is among Viking-Age burials in Britain and Ireland (Harrison and Ó Floinn 2014: 271). Only at Ingleby, Derbyshire is there repeated evidence for cremation ritual in a cemetery context, with most other instances being poorly-documented antiquarian finds (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998: 143–144; Richards *et al.* 2004: 97–99; Löffelmann *et al.* 2023; Löffelmann, this volume). Even among those burials furnished with recognisably Scandinavian-style grave goods where a 'pagan Scandinavian' attribution is highly likely, they are frequently associated with prehistoric monuments, a pattern also found in the unfurnished examples highlighted by Ó Riagáin (this volume; McLeod 2015). In light of the patterns identified in the current paper, there is scope for deconstructing what we mean by 'pagan' practice in early medieval contexts by using a 'long Iron Age' perspective.

There are also cases where the study of 'pagan Scandinavian' cremation may help us better discern changing Christian attitudes toward death and the body. The dramatic tension between different groups of Viking armies as seen in the Derbyshire cemeteries of Repton and Ingleby are a well-known example of heterogeneity amongst the invading forces: continuation of elite burial in a churchyard, with a barrow cemetery for cremations 5km away (Jarman *et al.* 2018; Löffelmann *et al.* 2023).

A northern parallel is found at the early Christian monastery of Whithorn in south-west Scotland. At the mortuary chapel which had been the main early medieval burial ground, an unburnt 'bundle of bones' sealed with a spread of cremated human bone was



Figure 16.3: Early medieval fired clay moulds for non-ferrous metal casting, from a re-opened Bronze Age cist burial in Golspie, Sutherland. NMS X.EQ 624–627 (Image reproduced with kind permission of the Trustees of National Museums Scotland)

placed outside the east gable. These have long been seen as an ‘overtly pagan’ deposit, perhaps even evidence for human sacrifice, dating to the late ninth century (Hill 1997: 186–189; McLeod 2018). There is another possible parallel at St Ninian’s Isle, Shetland, in a cist grave which contained both reinterred disarticulated remains as well as burnt deposits, the unburnt bone dated to the eleventh/twelfth century (Barrowman 2011).

Taking a longer-term perspective, both of these anomalous deposits come at key moments in the lifetime of their respective chapels. At Whithorn, the cremation deposit is closely linked to the decommissioning of the burial ground: after this event, ecclesiastical and burial activity shifted to the site of the later medieval Priory (Lowe 2009). At St Ninian’s Isle, the late date of the cist puts it a century or more after the heyday of ‘pagan Norse’ furnished burials in Shetland, and is instead contemporary with the rebuilding of the ancient chapel in stone. These Viking-Age deposits of burnt material, far apart in space and time, cannot easily be lumped into a single category. At Whithorn and St Ninian’s Isle, they seem redolent of the various responses to the encounter of mixed human remains during episodes of major change to the layout of ecclesiastical sites. While the historical context of Whithorn and Repton strongly links them to raiding activity, the use and deposition of burnt human bone cannot always be reduced to a single motivation, and should always be seen in context.

Discussion: cremation and re-creation

The evidence for cremation in the long Iron Age of northern Britain is sporadic, patchy and site-specific; the bonfire pits of Forteviot are dissimilar to the small cremation pits of Waulkmill and Balnuaran of Clava and the spread of burnt

bone at the Whithorn mortuary chapel, while the early medieval pyres and cairns of Hermisgarth remain unique in Britain. Outside of the few Roman military and civilian cemeteries, there is little evidence for ‘formal’ deposits in rituals that are recognisably imported from elsewhere. Evidence for the reuse of prehistoric funerary monuments comes from the northern and western isles, but except for the cremation and inhumation pits at Waulkmill, there is no sign of a continuity of funerary practice at any of these sites. Instead, in each place, the deposits are singular, and similarities in deposits centuries apart seem to be determined by the materiality of the antecedent monument rather than any recurring ritual.

A stronger throughline connecting these varied data points is the connection to ancient monuments. In East Lothian, cremated human bone was rarely found, but was almost invariably deposited in cists cut into prehistoric monuments. At Uyea, Sanaighmor, and possibly Stromness, Bronze Age urns and cists were revisited repeatedly over millennia, in ways which were all but indistinguishable from prehistoric funerary practices until the advent of radiocarbon dating showed otherwise. In these cases, it is argued that they represent the ‘re-creation’ of ancient burials, with cremation selected for its appropriateness within that specific context. Cremation may then be understood as secondary to the specific context of deposition in these cases, rather than signalling affiliation to a wider ethnic or religious group. The appearance of cremation at royal assembly sites like Forteviot can also be understood in the context of rituals of fertility and regeneration which were so central to these events, rather than any specific ‘pagan’ or anti-Christian ideology retained from prehistory. Indeed, the role of ‘re-creation’

in early medieval burial practices in northern Britain requires much more study, given that the ubiquitous cist and mound burials can also be seen as invocations of more ancient forms (Maldonado 2011: 82–97; 2016: 49–50).

These examples serve as an illuminating tale about the long-lived agency of prehistoric funerary monuments. Ancient barrows and cairns elicited complex responses over time. In several cases documented in this paper, the encounter with the ancient burnt dead prompted the re-creation, perhaps even a ‘re-enactment’, of an ancient funeral. The early medieval funerary events at Uyea, Oxtro, and perhaps Easterton, also involved an act of destruction and repurposing of much more recent symbol-incised stones. The use of cremation as a funerary rite within these events has less to do with the biography or beliefs of the cremated individual, as it was dictated by the specifics of the site and its materiality.

In other words, we may be prioritising the presence of human remains at the expense of the actual context of these deposits. As seen in various prehistoric contexts, the affordances of burnt bone render it a dynamic substance which collapses the divide between ‘human’ and ‘animal’ (Cooper *et al.* 2020: 152–154). Looking forward in time, the reuse of ancient monuments in a Viking-Age context is most often read as an act of land-taking, but having identified the long-term patterns of reuse they fit into within northern Britain, it is not necessary to ascribe them a ‘colonial’ Scandinavian identity simply by dint of being cremations.

Another area of potential further research is the growing corpus of interventions into prehistoric monuments in early medieval northern Britain, which often involve rather anonymous ‘fire pits’ and charcoal deposits. These are often discovered through comprehensive radiocarbon dating programmes, and as recent reassessments have shown (Ó Ríagáin and Gleeson, both this volume), they rarely find their way out of the grey literature or period-specific publications in which they are reported. While the reuse of ancient monuments for ostentatious burials, churches and power centres is a well-studied phenomenon, there is less recognition of how these antecedent landscapes were perceived in the early medieval period (e.g. Semple 2013). Fire pits and charcoal scoops can be seen as evidence for ephemeral later occupation, but in the context of the examples listed above, may well be the fleeting remnants of more ritualised acts of remaking the ancient past in the early medieval present. That the use of fire rituals as commemorative acts could continue into the Christian era is now shown by the deposits at Forteviot and Whithorn, and recent work in Ireland (O’Brien 2020; Gleeson and McLaughlin 2021). The case of Forteviot remains an intriguing wrinkle, with an apparent divide between a zone of inhumation burials in and around barrows, and cremated remains deposited within the prehistoric monument complex. However,

burnt material added to inhumation graves, and in one case a charred log coffin, shows the presence of fire rituals even in the context of inhumation burial. The presence or absence of human bone in such burnt deposits may not be the hard divide we presume it to be (cf. Büster 2021; Cooper *et al.* 2020: 149–150), and instead the link might be the act of burning itself.

Conclusion

We can end by addressing the two ‘burning questions’ with which this paper began. With regard to visibility, it should now be clear that cremation was always lurking under the surface as a funerary rite, as is now being recognised elsewhere in other early medieval Christian contexts (Lippok 2020; Gleeson and McLaughlin 2021). Its rarity in the archaeological record is ironically determined by its widespread appearance in un-ostentatious pits and spreads, unseen or unnoticed until the relatively recent practice of radiocarbon dating a wider range of deposits from excavated sites. Like other ‘anomalous’ or rare practices, it should not be seen in every case as a sign of intrusive rites brought by outsiders, but rather one among many complex emotive responses which can be elicited upon a death.

Despite the positive steps highlighted here, visibility remains a major issue. Burnt remains from Uyea and Stromness in the Northern Isles were only dated as part of a project establishing a typology for prehistoric cremations in museum collections. The fact that they were indistinguishable from other Bronze Age cremation deposits means there are innumerable other examples which may have been lost during antiquarian interventions. It is also of some consequence that at both Uyea and Sanaighmor, Iron Age and early medieval cremations were nearly indistinguishable from one another despite being a millennium apart, and at St Ninian’s Isle, remains thought to be prehistoric were shown to be early medieval. There is a sense that, for much of northern Britain, death in the long Iron Age is visible mainly through infrequent episodes of reuse and reoccupation of ancient monuments, and in these cases, the use of cremation was often dictated by the encounter with antecedent deposits, rather than any shared or sustained Iron Age funerary rituals that we can perceive.

As for the second ‘burning question’, the case of Forteviot in particular should warn us away from assuming a blanket prohibition of cremation in the Christian era. Even in early Anglo-Saxon contexts, cremation practice was characterised by its heterogeneity (Williams 2004; 2015), so the observation that ‘mixed-rite’ cemeteries stop at the Tees is not the full story. In south-east Scotland, which has the most extensive ‘Anglo-Saxon’ archaeological footprint north of the border, funerary deposits incorporating burnt remains do occur, but in ways which do not conform to a

single recurring ritual. The lack of evidence for cremation rites could be interpreted as a British Christian rejection of pagan rites. But more importantly, the current chapter demonstrates that cremation was already rare in the Iron Age of this region, and rather than expecting a diffusion of practices by 'pagans' or 'invaders', we should pay more attention to existing regional funerary preferences over the long term.

It is in this context that we can understand some of the examples of cremations dated to the later first millennium AD which can plausibly be termed 'Viking Age'. The recurring pattern of association with ancient monuments fits in with the long-term trends established by the current paper. The choice to cremate the dead cannot simply be understood as part of a coherent ethnic or religious ideology. Instead, cremation practices in northern Britain must be understood within their own archaeological and landscape contexts. It is this more scattered evidence that we are still learning to see.

However, the lack of spatial patterning should not lead us to believe that the decision to cremate the dead was taken lightly; as Williams (2002: 62) noted with regard to early medieval cremation practices, avoiding the potential ethnic or religious valence of funerary rituals can lead to an 'absence of interpretation', leaving us with little to say about what must have been a highly emotive and memorable act. It is interesting then that Gleeson and McLaughlin (2021) detect some parallels across Scotland and Ireland wherein cremation deposits cluster in the seventh to ninth centuries, allowing for the possibility that there was indeed a shared impulse, religious or otherwise, behind the chronology of early medieval cremation

which needs further research. And yet it remains the case that applying any single interpretive ideology, such as lingering paganism or Norse invaders, upon all instances of cremation is counter-productive given the scattered nature of the evidence. As Lippok (2020: 157) puts it: 'To give a singular reason would be to recreate the problem... [w]e must move away from grand narratives and instead focus on the strength of evidence that variability can provide'.

We also cannot shy away from the fact that human remains were treated as objects in these deposits (Armit and Ginn 2007; Büster 2021), and in some ways the treatment of the burnt remains was secondary to the act of intervening upon an ancient place. What we have so far is evidence not for why cremation was used, but only for where cremations were deposited. Much of the evidence so far comes from 'archaeological serendipity' (Campbell 2000: 184) rather than by design, as radiocarbon dating programmes unexpectedly reveal early medieval practices. An awareness of this category of depositional practice should be folded into post-excavation designs. Even with data gathered in this unstructured way, the persistent link with ancient monuments suggests a link between burnt human bodies and a sense of a deep past. Beyond looking past 'Anglo-Saxons', 'Vikings', 'Gael', 'Britons' and 'Picts', we can perhaps de-centre the individual deceased person from these deposits altogether, and envision cremation as a way of collapsing both time and subjectivity, specific to the materiality of place as much as socio-political context. We are still very much learning to see cremation, but it has already given us a new way to look at the early medieval past.

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Early Medieval Cremation Burials in Atlantic Northern Britain

Russell Ó Ríagáin

This discussion outlines the evidence for cremation burials in Atlantic northern Britain, c. 400–1100 CE. It works through the variety of evidence (absolute dating, artefacts, stratigraphy) and touches on the issues associated with each, before moving onto topics such as the selection and deposition of cremated human remains, monument reuse, and the role of trans- and interdisciplinary research. The evidence is more extensive than usually realised, representing a significant portion of the overall dated cremation burials in northern Britain across all periods, demonstrating that what is often regarded as a Bronze Age practice continued down to the end of the first millennium CE. This, in turn raises questions regarding the use of cremation evidence alone to identify intrusive practices associated with settlement from Scandinavia or from among the Scandinavian diaspora in the period c. 800–1000 CE.

Cremation; early medieval Scotland; Viking Age; transdisciplinary research; absolute dating; material culture

Introduction

Femke Lippok: Could you introduce yourself and your work relating to early medieval cremation burials?

Russell Ó Ríagáin: I have a diverse background, having originally studied history and archaeology, Irish, and sociology over the course of my early degrees, and I have worked in transcultural studies, postcolonial studies, English and geography departments before returning to an archaeology department at University College Dublin. Over the past decade or so, I have been exploring the ways in which historically attested episodes of colonialism took material form in Iron Age and medieval Britain and Ireland (c. 800 BCE to 400 CE and c. 400–1500 CE, respectively). More recently, I have been expanding this to cover the North Atlantic, Scandinavia, Frisia and Saxony. Burial evidence, as a proxy for the presence of human agents in a landscape, has played an important role in my research, and when combined with categories of evidence such as standing remains, toponymy, stray finds, etc., has helped fill many of the lacunae in the documentary record and to move beyond a reliance on any one category of evidence for framing the discussion. This interest in burial evidence led me to identify a heterogeneous series of early medieval cremations in Argyll during

my doctoral research; three of these were identified by working through excavation summaries and grey literature, and the other is briefly mentioned in an excavation report relating to an adjacent furnished burial. Just after the submission of my thesis, a radiocarbon date was also obtained from a furnished cremation burial that had been excavated by antiquarians (Kingscross, Arran). The evidence I encountered during my PhD research led me to realise that early medieval cremations are not outliers, nor are they necessarily always representative of the introduction of locally novel practices via migration. Since 2020, I have expanded my dataset to cover more of northern Britain in both the Iron Age and early medieval periods, with some interesting results in relation to continuity and heterogeneity in funerary cremation practices.

Howard Williams: Have cremation practices been given sufficient attention and what interpretations, if any, have been posed to explain them?

RÓR: Aside from my own work, early medieval cremations in northern Britain have in this century been treated in three important doctoral theses concerned with wider patterns of funerary activity (Harrison 2008; Tucker 2010; Maldonado 2011). To these, one can also add the important recent paper by Gleeson and McLaughlin (2021) on early medieval Ireland, but with a discussion of the evidence across the North Channel. However, I would still say that cremation practices in the first millennium CE have not been given sufficient attention, at least in the geographical areas I have specialised in (Ireland and northern Britain).

The Cremated Bones Project, run by the National Museums of Scotland, along with further programmes of research by National Museums Scotland (Sheridan 2002a and b, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006) dated cremated human remains in museum collections. There are also more recent projects related to Viking Age furnished burials (Sheridan 2019), archaeo-DNA and stable isotopic analysis that have led to human remains from older excavations being radiocarbon-dated. In combination with the greater number of radiocarbon-dated samples per site, these projects have facilitated a questioning of many of the assumptions held about the chronological specificity of cremation burials in northern Britain.

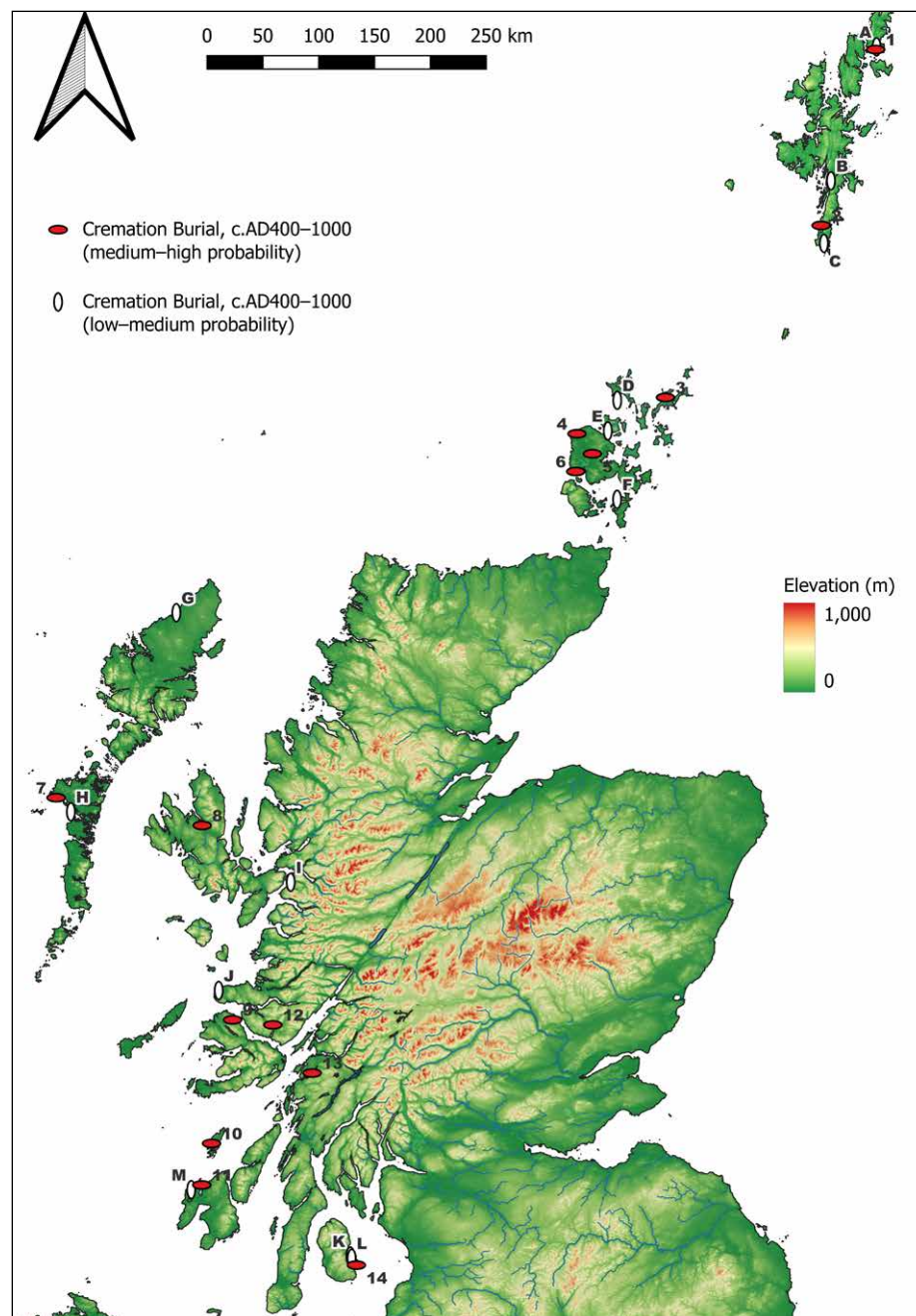
However, there still is a shortfall in the number of samples being radiocarbon dated. For example, the budget for emergency rescue excavations is stretched quite thin by the sheer number of rescue excavations required due to the increasing severity of storms in the North Atlantic, Irish Sea and North Sea, meaning that many such sites are only dated by material-culture associations or similarity to other sites. Hopefully, the material in storage from these excavations might also be sampled for absolute dating in the future.

Turning to interpretation(s), it is quite easy to fall into the trap of essentialising periodisation, of treating practices and their associated material traces as unique to the periods in which they are most dominant, rather than more fully acknowledging the messiness of human society with all of its selectivity, conservatism and innovation. Such thinking can lead to chronological assumptions being made in the field and at the desk based on the practice of cremation without enough recourse to absolute dating. This can, in turn, result in some archaeologists encountering cremated bone, mentally placing the remains in the earlier portion of the long floruit of cremation practices (i.e. the Neolithic period and Bronze Age) and discounting alternative chronological possibilities. Moreover, when faced with a 2σ radiocarbon range firmly in the early medieval period from cremated human bone or from a context containing it, the immediate – and fully understandable – temptation for some archaeologists would be to question whether it is from residual material, an issue with the dating of the sample, or an outlier in some other way. These are, of course, valid concerns – as I will discuss in the next section on the reliability of the associated dating evidence – but it is difficult to dismiss early medieval dates occurring in samples from cremations across several sites.

Such issues are not, of course, confined to the analysis of cremation practices – one might think of the big uptick in the number of known Iron Age non-monumental settlements in Ireland and northern Britain that has accompanied increases in samples sent for radiocarbon-dating from commercial excavations as a parallel. This increase in absolute dates per site has often demonstrated continuities in funerary and burial practices from the Bronze Age into the Iron Age and occasionally into the early medieval period at sites where a Bronze Age date would have been otherwise assumed.

In cases where early medieval cremations are not argued away by residuality, procedural error, etc., it is tempting to resort to migration as an explanation for localised or regional novelty in the burial record. This is something I have done in relation to the Argyll material in Table 17.1 and Figures 17.1–17.2 (Ó Ríagáin 2016, cf. 2020: 262–276, 502–504, 1141–1170). Gleeson and McLaughlin (2021) have outlined a number of cases of early medieval cremation in Ireland, while also questioning the continuity of homeland practices by diasporic communities as an explanatory factor. They draw particular attention to the radiocarbon dates from oak charcoal at Cleigh, Lorn, as broadly comparable to a seventh–eighth-century peak in radiocarbon dates from cremation burials in Ireland (Gleeson and McLaughlin 2021: 390). The cremated human remains from Forteviot (Maldonado 2017: 329, 337–340; Campbell

Figure 17.1: Map of cremation burials dating to the period c. 400–1000 CE in Atlantic northern Britain; medium–high probability examples numbered (see Table 17.1); low–medium probability examples lettered (see Table 17.2) and largely omitted from the analysis; for cremation burials in lowland Scotland in the same period, see Maldonado (2011)



and Driscoll 2020: 67–93) also conform to this peak. A fairly small but heterogeneous series of cremation burials in northern Britain dating to the Iron Age and early medieval period is discussed by Tucker (2010: 272–294), Maldonado (2011: 87, 106–109; 2013: 11–13) and Harding (2017: 105). This work has demonstrated the necessity of moving past rigid chronological divisions based on the

transition to Christianity or arrival of raiders and settlers from Scandinavia and to acknowledge the messiness of human social and cultural practice. My recent research on cremation burials in Atlantic northern Britain has re-evaluated the archaeological and absolute-dating evidence, adding further possibilities and probabilities, while discounting others.

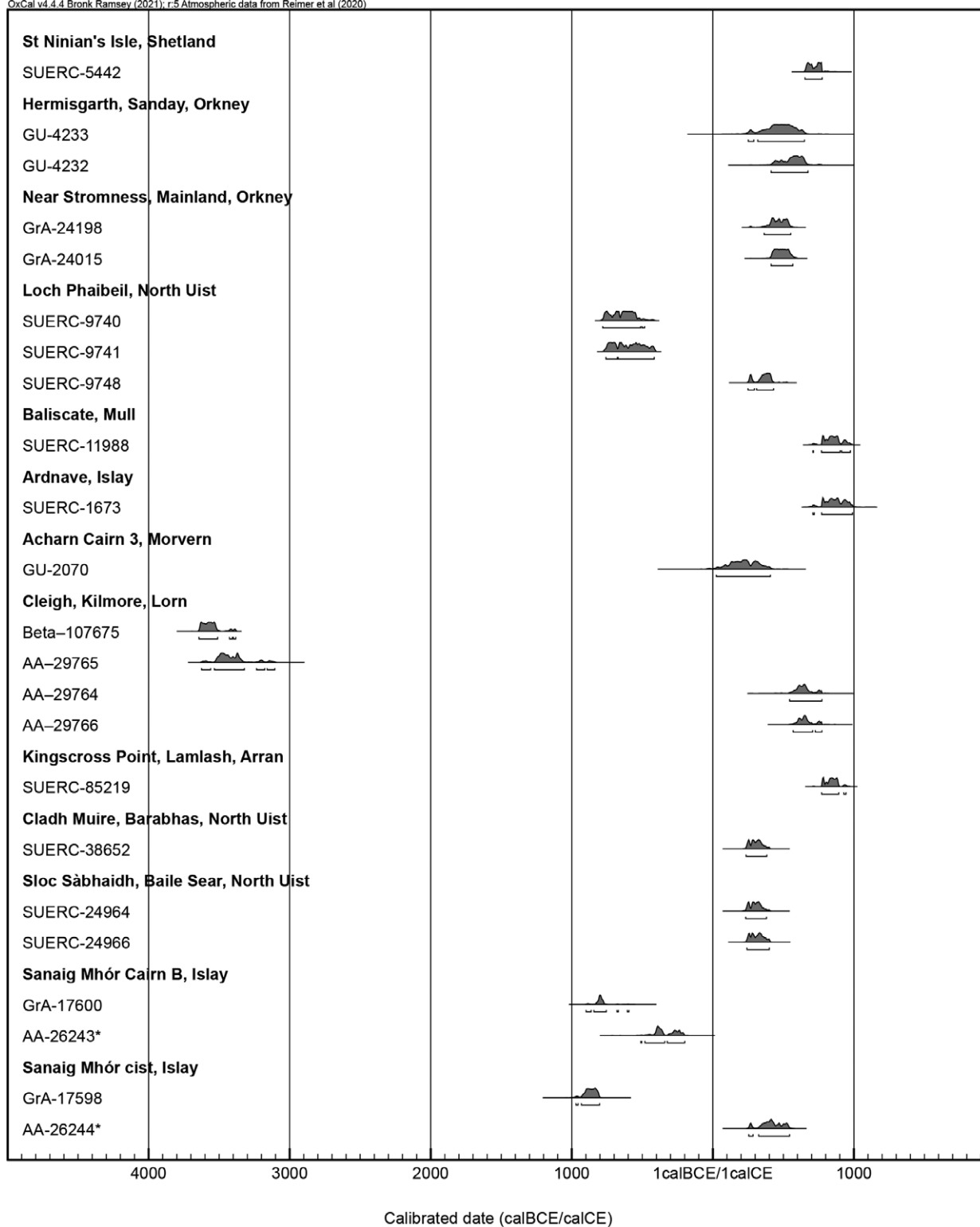


Figure 17.2: Selected radiocarbon dates from sites in Atlantic northern Britain with evidence or possible evidence for early medieval cremation burials, both direct and from associated contexts, calibrated using IntCal 20 on OxCal (Reimer *et al.* 2020)

Table 17.1: Overview of cremation burials (CBs) and/or sites containing cremated human remains (CHR) in early medieval Atlantic northern Britain, medium-high level of confidence in dating. N = Neolithic (4100–2500 BCE); BA = Bronze Age (c. 2500–800 BCE); IA= Iron Age (c. 800 BCE–500 CE); EIA = Early Iron Age (c. 800–400 CE); LIA = Late Iron Age (c. 100–500 CE); EMP = early medieval period (c. 400–800 CE); VA = Viking Age (c. 800–1000 CE), period overlaps intentional; en-dash separating historical periods = possible continuity, semi-colon separating historical periods = multiperiod site

Map	Site	Location	Class	Dating	C14	Confidence	Artefacts	Associated monuments	Associated inhumations	Associated cremations
Shetland										
1	The Ward	Uyea	urns in short-cists in cairn	EIA; EMP	EIA	high (C14); medium (urn covered by EMP sculpture)	20+ steatite cinerary urns; fragment of Class 1 symbol stone used as urn cap	cairn, short cists	no	20+ sets of CHR
2	St Ninian's Isle	Mainland	5 short cists, some urns under cairn	LIA-EMP	EMP	high (C14); medium (stratigraphy)	urn fragments of LIA fabric	cairn	yes	5
Orkney										
3	Hermisgarth	Sanday	4 long-cists in cairn; 2 pyre settings	LIA-EMP	LIA-EMP	medium (C14 from inhumation, CB dated by association)	1 sherd of coarse pottery	cairn, cremation platforms	2 in cists	1 partial CB
4	Oxtro	Mainland	urns in short-cists in settlement mound	LIA-EMP	no	medium (cist covered by EMP sculpture)	Class 1 symbol stone used as cist cover, copper-alloy ring in one cist; EMP-VA ring-headed pin unstratified, shaft of silver 'ball-type' penannular brooch unstratified; [stone loom weights, sandstone lamps, bone combs, bone pin, bone ring, bone knife handle, Samian, copper-alloy handle (all prob. from settlement phases)]	stone roundhouse	no	yes
5	Manse of Harry, Netlater	Mainland	urns and cists in settlement mound	LIA-EMP	no	medium (postdates stone roundhouse)	urns [copper-alloy ring-brooch (LMP), bone handle, copper-alloy ring, clay cup, prob. from settlement phases]	stone roundhouse	yes	multiple sets of CHR
6	Near Stromness	Mainland	urn in short-cist in barrow	LIA-EMP	LIA-EMP	high (C14 from CHR)	steatite urn wrapped in cattle skin	barrow	no	poss. 2nd set of CHR
Outer Hebrides										
7	Loch Phaibeil	North Uist	cists and stone roundhouse	EIA; LIA	EIA; LIA-EMP	medium (2×EIA CBs, LIA-EMP date from wooden object from eroded 3rd cist)	part of birch bowl throughout	stone roundhouse, boat noost, revetted structures	no	yes
Inner Hebrides										

Map	Site	Location	Class	Dating	C14	Confidence	Artefacts	Associated monuments	Associated inhumations	Associated cremations
8	Tote House	Tote (near Skeabost)	furnished burial inserted into mound	N-BA; VA	VA	medium ('charred bone' may not be human')	Type E-F iron axe, copper-alloy looped ring-headed pin, poss. casket/chest, ivory bead	mound with cist at centre	no	undated cist burial
9	Baliscate	Mull	scoop inserted into stone row	EMP-VA	EMP-VA	high (C14 from charcoal mixed with CHR)	none	stone row	no	no
10	Machrins 2c	Colonsay	cremation burial	Viking Age		medium (undated CHR in close to furnished burial and juvenile remains)	none	cut grave	furnished burial; juvenile burial	no
11	Ardnave	Islay	pyre site	EMP-VA	EMP-VA	high (charcoal mixed with CHR)	none	multi-period funerary-settlement landscape	yes	poss.
Argyll										
12	Acharn (Cairn 3)	Morvern	cists in cairn	LIA-EMP	LIA-EMP	medium	coarse pottery, lithics	multiple cairns	no	yes
13	Cleigh	Lorn	scoop inserted into burial cairn	N; EMP-VA	N; EMP	high (C14 from charcoal mixed with CHR)	none	N cairn; EMP wall feature cut into cairn	poss.	poss.
14	Kingscross Point	Arran	furnished burial (gender-neutral)	Viking Age	VA	high (C14 from CHR)	iron rivets (from chest), styca of Wigmund of York (CE 931×854), whalebone plaque	stone roundhouse	no	no

FL: How reliable is the evidence for cremation practices in late Iron Age/early medieval Scotland?

RÖR: Considering that the majority of cremation burials in northern Britain date to the Bronze Age (see e.g. Sheridan 2002a and b, 2003, 2004), it is difficult to date cremation burials to the early material period by analogical arguments. This leaves us reliant on a range of other evidence of varying levels of reliability to identify cremation practices in northern Britain in the late Iron Age and early medieval period. This is why I have provided two tables, one of sites of medium or higher probability (Table 17.1), and the other of low to medium probability (Table 17.2). The second group is largely excluded from the analysis here, but should be kept in mind for further research—not least radiocarbon-dating. Several cremation burials dating to the northern-British Early (EIA, c. 800–400 BCE) or Middle Iron Age (MIA, c. 400 BCE–100 CE) are excluded from the analysis here, but they will be discussed by me in a future publication. Further sites have been excluded due to not having evidence for human cremation burial post-dating the northern-British Bronze Age (c. 2300–800 BCE), the cremated human remains being undated, or not actually

having associated cremated human remains, as in the case of the Knowe of Skea, Westray, Orkney, where all of the burnt bone was found on analysis to be from non-human animals (Gooney 2015: 87–91).

Although thirteen early medieval cremation burials might seem a small group, there are 279 sites with cremation burials of all levels of probability listed on Historic Environment Scotland's Canmore database, of which sixty-three are in Atlantic Scotland. The cremations in Tables 17.1–17.2, along with several more cremation burials dating to earlier in the Iron Age, represent a considerable proportion of the overall figures across all periods.

For this reason, it has been necessary on my part to squeeze the evidence as much as possible, which means that there are few sites in the corpus that are free of caveats. To date, I have built up a gazetteer of some 21,000 words analysing the evidence for every cremation burial postdating the Bronze Age, which will form the backbone of a future publication. Rather than repeat those more in-depth discussions, I will break the dating of the sites down into three groups to discuss the many issues with dating this series: (1) cremation burials dated by absolute

Table 17.2: Overview of cremation burials (CBs) and/or sites containing cremated human remains (CHR) in early medieval Atlantic northern Britain, low-medium level of confidence in dating. N = Neolithic (4100–2500 BCE); BA = Bronze Age (c. 2500–800 BCE); IA= Iron Age (c. 800 BCE– 500 CE); EIA = Early Iron Age (c. 800–400 CE); LIA = Late Iron Age (c. 100–500 CE); EMP = early medieval period (c. 400–800 CE); VA = Viking Age (c. 800–1000 CE), period overlaps intentional; en-dash separating historical periods = possible continuity, semi-colon separating historical periods = multiperiod site

Map	Site	Location	Class	Dating	C14	Confidence	Artefacts	Associated monuments	Associated inhumations	Associated cremations
Shetland										
A	Lee of Clivocast	Unst	poss. furnished burial	VA	no	low (no further information)	'armour'	mound	no	no
B	Little Asta	Mainland	two-sto- reyed cist	BA-EMP	no	low (dating on analogy to similar sites)	two steatite urns	funerary landscape	inhumations	poss.
C	Quendale	Mainland	poss. furnished burial	BA-EMP; VA	no	low (19th C works)	steatite urns (may have been non-cinerary), silver arm-rings, coins of Æðelbert, Æðelstan	no	no	no
Orkney										
D	Knowe of Skea	Westray	cemetery	IA-VA	yes	low (no CHR, all burnt animal bone)	no	stone roundhouse	multiple	no
E	Church Knowe	Rousay	cemetery	BA-EMP	no	low (undated)	iron rivets or nails (from topsoil), coarse cinerary urns, flint objects	mound	five	two
F	Hunda	Hunda	poss. furnished burial	EMP-VA	no	low (may have been midden)	polisher or smoother of green porphyry or jasper found in stone urn	cairn, mound, poss. stone roundhouse	no	no
Outer Hebrides										
G	Cladh Mhuire, Barabhais	Lewis	cemetery; settle- ment; cemetery	BA; LIA-EMP	BA; LIA-EMP	low (no cremated human bone)	decorated Hebridean coarse pottery, burnt animal bone	cairn, cist, stone-lined ditches, chapel, longhouses	one	poss.
H	Sloc Sàbhaidh, Baile Sear	North Uist	deposit of human mandible in floor	LIA	LIA	low (no cremated human bone)	Craggan ware, Vaul Ware; copper-alloy ring, bone pins; burnt and unburnt animal bone	wheelhouse	one	poss.
Wester Ross										
I	Barnhill	Glenelg	urn cremation burial	BA-IA-EMP	no		urn, iron pin (not in direct association)	no	no	no
Argyll										
J	Sanna	Ardnamurchan	unen- closed settle- ment(s), burials?	N-V+	no	low (artefacts not directly associated with CHR)	Beaker pottery, Hebridean undecorated coarse pottery, copper-alloy ring-headed pin, copper-alloy buckle [poss. not all from same site]	unenclosed settlement	no	poss.
K	Dùnan Beag (Lower Cairn)	Arran	Clyde cairn	N-BA; IA-VA	no	low (iron knife not directly associated with CHR)	iron knife	cairns	yes	yes
L	Millhill, Lamlash	Arran	furnished burial	VA	no	low (no cremated human bone)	single-edged iron sword, conical shield-boss	mound	no	no
Inner Hebrides										
M	Sanaig Mhór (cist)	Islay	2 urns in cairn and cist	BA-EIA	BA; IA-EMP	low (prob- C14 dates related to BA-EIA)	copper-alloy arm-ring, copper-alloy pin	put burial, cairns, cists	yes	yes

dating, (2) dated by artefactual associations, and (3) dated by stratigraphical and analogical arguments. Some sites may, of course, belong to more than one of these three groups, which means that there must of necessity be some slight repetition in the discussion. Before that, though, it is first necessary to discuss the issues related to the survival of evidence more generally.

Taphonomy, survival and identification

RÓR: The corpus of cremation burials across all periods may be so small due to what was done with the human remains post-cremation. The potential for the deliberate scattering of cremated human remains post-cremation must be considered (e.g. Williams 2006: 131–133, 2008: 241–243; Harding 2016: vii, 3, 120, 167, 269–270, 278), be it into the wind, over the ground, or into bodies of water. As Tucker (2010: 272) points out, the potential for deliberate scattering makes the identification of pyre sites particularly important, as they would be the only physical evidence for burials treated in this way.

Representative deposits of post-cremation human remains may have been inserted into a range of media, such as pre-existing funerary monuments, active settlement structures, defunct or decommissioned settlement remains, caves, rock crevices, among tree roots, to name but a few possibilities. These deposits may be easily missed during excavation, especially when the sieving of deposits from within features does not occur. This has proven to be an issue at the cremation cemetery at Heath Wood, Ingleby, Derbyshire, England (discussed by Löffelman, this volume), for example, where modern excavation techniques demonstrated the presence of deposits of cremated human remains in what had previously been interpreted as ‘cenotaph mounds’ (Richards 2000: 147, 2004: 89; Hadley 2006: 239; contra e.g. Posnansky 1955: 141, 1956: 43; Richards *et al.* 1995: 53–60, 66; see also Bateman 1861: 92–93; Harrison 2008: 579–586). This is certainly worth considering for Millhill, Lamlash, Arran, where broken fragments of a single-edged sword with a guard and wooden pommel, and a conical shield-boss were found by workmen 1m from the surface of the mound (Balfour 1909, 1910; Grieg 1940: 27–28; Harrison 2000). No human remains were noted, but the workmen may well have missed cremated material (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998: 95–96). It is classed as ‘[c]remation?’ by Harrison (2008: 513–514). The presence of fly puparia in the shield boss and the pattern of corrosion indicate that the shield seems to have rotted in the open air (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998: 96). This might point towards inhumation, or possibly to exposure before cremation or inhumation or a cenotaph burial.

Furthermore, token deposits of cremated human remains may also have been inserted into pre-existing

cremation deposits in urns, cists, pits and chambers in megalithic tombs. In some instances, the previous deposit(s) may have been cleaned out, and in other instances they may have become mixed, and in yet others, they may have been kept separate but in close association. Each of these raises problems in relation to representative sampling of archaeological deposits.

Absolute dating arguments and caveats

RÓR: The introduction of accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS) enabled the dating of much smaller samples for lower costs, including the collagen from cremated human bone (Rose *et al.* 2019). This has left us less reliant on material found in association with cremated human bone, consisting of large samples of long-lived organisms subject to the Old Wood Effect (Warner 1990) or to the downward percolation of humic acid (Ashmore 1997: 266), or to long uncertainty ranges due to being mixed samples. However, the expense of obtaining radiocarbon dates is still a consideration for rescue excavations due to erosion, meaning that many sites – or individual contexts within sites – are left undated. This raises issues about how representative the dates are, especially in the case of burial clusters, cemeteries and the reuse of funerary monuments.

Procedural error is a risk for any laboratory technique, as occurred with dates related to northern Britain in Glasgow in the 1980s (Stenhouse quoted in Ashmore *et al.* 2000: 45) and Oxford more recently (Sheridan and Higham 2006). This impacted several sites connected to my general work, but none of the sites discussed here were impacted. Procedures also vary between laboratories, both in terms of the equipment involved and what material within the sample is used to obtain the radiocarbon date. For bone collagen, for example, techniques focussing on the bioapatite in the bone sample can return very different dates to those obtained by other means. Table 17.3 outlines the dates from Sanaig Mhór on Islay, where radiocarbon dates derived from bioapatite were at major variance from those obtained from other constituents of the bone collagen. This might be compared with Table 17.4, from a barrow near Stromness, where the two techniques produced comparatively little variance.

Old Wood Effect must be factored in for the probable pyre or cremation platform at Ardnave (oak charcoal), Baliscate on Mull (undifferentiated charcoal), and the two early medieval dates from Cleigh in Lorn (oak charcoal). Recent research has indicated that old wood effect may also occur in human remains cremated in pyres consisting of long-lived species (Annaert *et al.* 2020).

The presence of humic acid in charcoal samples is an issue in Cairn 1 at Acharn, Morvern, Argyll, as indicated by the $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ ratio, meaning that the date ranges may seem later than the actual cremation-burial event (Ashmore 1997:

Table 17.3: Radiocarbon dates from Sanaig Mhór, Islay (Cook 1999; Tucker 2010: 540)

Lab. no.	bp	Error	Cal. 2σ	δ ¹³ C	Material	Phase	Context
AA-26244	1655	50	255–545 CE	–24.3	cremated human bone	1	cist containing cremation burial (cist)
AA-26243	2300	50	512–200 BCE	–24.5	cremated human bone	1	cist containing cremation burial (Cairn B)
GrA-17598	2720	40	971–804 BCE	???	cremated human bone (bioapatite)	1	cist containing cremation burial (cist)
GrA-17600	2620	40	899–596 BCE	???	cremated human bone (bioapatite)	1	cist containing cremation burial (Cairn B)

Table 17.4: Radiocarbon dates from a barrow near Stromness on Orkney (Sheridan 2003: 169; 2004, 176)

Lab. no.	bp	Error	Cal. 2σ	δ ¹³ C	Material	Phase	Context
GrA-24015	1585	40	CE 414–567	???	cremated human cranium fragment	1	contents of steatite urn near centre of barrow
GrA-24198	1620	40	CE 365–553	???	cremated cranium fragment (bioapatite)	1	contents of steatite urn near centre of barrow

266; Scottish Radiocarbon Database, in Canmore ID 22682; Sheridan 2006; 202). While the mixed charcoal sample from the fill of a cist containing Acharn Cairn 3 (Tables 17.1, 17.5) has a δ¹³C ratio more consistent with wood species, humic acid cannot be completely discounted. Scotland is a wet country, and the percolation of humic acid may affect cremated human remains. It also remains to be seen if the use of peat in pyres might also impact the isotopic ratios in cremated human remains. All of these issues should be kept in mind for samples from areas where peat may be present in the soil, and especially when the δ¹³C is not always quoted in the reporting of radiocarbon dates.

The δ¹³C ratio is even more important for identifying instances where the Marine Reservoir Effect should be considered. Luckily, none of the sites discussed here are reliant on shell samples, which are problematic due to being subject to both the absorption of older marine carbon and to absorbing atmospheric carbon on exposure to air (see Ascough *et al.* 2004). However, we must consider that many of the cremated human remains were from individuals that consumed marine species in their diets. To use an inhumation as an example, the furnished human–horse burial at Ytri-Neslönd, Mývatnssveit, Iceland (Ascough *et al.* 2004), indicates discrepancies in δ¹³C, radiocarbon years between the human and horse remains (Table 17.6). Calibrating the human remains using the terrestrial/atmospheric IntCal20 ([a], Reimer *et al.* 2020) and Marine20 ([m], Heaton *et al.* 2020) gives quite different results. It is unlikely that any human would consume a 100% marine diet, so the reality must lie in between. An important paper by Barrett *et al.* (2000) uses the δ¹³C ratio to estimate the level of marine carbon present in samples and to correct accordingly when calibrating. I have been

attempting to do something similar for furnished burials in Ireland and northern Britain.

There are many caveats, though. The relationship between food consumption and the production of bone tissue is very complex and cannot be considered in linear terms. Different parts of the body lay down new tissue at different rates: a rib or scaphoid would turn over much more quickly than a larger bone like a femur, with the difference measurable in decades. Diet may have shifted considerably in the intervening period. This should be considered when comparing between the sets of cremated human remains, where there is much variance between the body parts sampled, not to mention occasional difficulties in identifying body parts among cremated human remains (Table 17.5).

Dating by artefactual associations, stratigraphy and analogy

RÓR: With the exception of the furnished cremation burial at Kingscross Point on Arran and the furnished probable cremation burial at Tote on Skye, there are few surviving artefacts directly associated with early medieval cremation burials in Atlantic northern Britain. While the classification of items such as swords and axes, and the associated chronologies of these sub-classifications, might be open to debate, they might all be placed in a general bracket of c. 750–1050 CE, if not 850–950 CE, which is a resolution comparable to radiocarbon dating. It would be difficult to use any of the associated artefacts for a period within a hundred years (Wilson 1976: 397). The broad artefactual dating of the two furnished burials has been confirmed by radiocarbon dating at Kingscross (Sheridan 2019: 226).

Table 17.5: Selected radiocarbon dates from sites in Atlantic northern Britain with evidence or possible evidence for early medieval cremation burials, both direct and from associated contexts, calibrated using IntCal 20 on OxCal; NA = $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ not available; map number/letter given in brackets before location, with published source of date in parentheses

Lab. no.	bp	Error	Cal. 2 σ	$\delta^{13}\text{C}$	Material	Phase	Context
[2] St Ninian's Isle, Mainland, Shetland (Barrowman 2011: 80)							
SUERC-5442	1305	35	664–775 CE	–20.0	Human bone (femur)	3	Crouched female inhumation in Cist 305
[3] Hermisgarth, Sanday, Orkney (Downes and Morris 1998: 613)							
GU-4233	1580	100	252–650 CE	NA	Human bone (femur)	?2	Extended female inhumation in Cist 003 under Cairn 020
GU-4232	1480	80	414–675 CE	NA	Human bone (femur)	?2	Extended female inhumation in Cist 003 under Cairn 020
[6] Near Stromness, Mainland, Orkney (Sheridan 2003: 169; 2004: 176)							
GrA-24198	1620	40	365–553 CE	NA	cremated cranium fragment (bioapatite)	?2	contents of steatite urn near centre of barrow
GrA-24015	1585	40	414–567 CE	NA	cremated human cranium fragment	?2	contents of steatite urn near centre of barrow
[7] Loch Phaibeil, North Uist (Tucker 2010: 539)							
SUERC-9740	2500	35	781–485 BCE	–19.6	cremated human bone	1	cist containing cremation burial (2)
SUERC-9741	2460	35	758–416 BCE	–18.9	cremated human bone	1	cist containing cremation burial (1)
SUERC-9748	1690	35	250–431 CE	–28.7	birch	3?	bowl roughout from cist
[9] Baliscate, Mull (Wright 2006)							
SUERC-11988	1180	35	725–967 CE	NA	charcoal	2	mixture of charcoal and cremated human bone in scoop near orthostat in stone row
[11] Ardnave, Islay (Moore 2004)							
SUERC-1673	1170	45	721–980 CE	NA	charcoal (oak)	2	possible hearth or pyre mixed with cremated human bone
[12] Acharn Cairn 3, Morvern (Ritchie and Thornber 1988: 97; Ashmore 1997: 266)							
GU-2070	1825	80	25–409 CE	–25.7	charcoal (mixed alder hazel and oak)	2	fill of cist with cremated bone
[13] Cleigh, Kilmore, Lorn (Ashmore 2002)							
Beta-107675	4780	40	3641–3380 BCE	NA	charcoal (hazel)	1	deposit abutting stonework
AA-29765	4630	60	3631–3116 BCE	NA	charcoal (hazel)	1	deposit abutting stonework
AA-29764	1400	65	474–770 CE	NA	charcoal (oak)	2	part of rough wall cut into earlier cairn
AA-29766	1385	55	541–771 CE	NA	charcoal (oak)	2	secondary feature in earlier cairn containing cremated bone
[14] Kingscross Point, Lamlash, Arran (Sheridan 2019: 226)							
SUERC-85219	1185	24	772–945 CE	–25.5	cremated human bone (probable cranium fragment)	2	under burial mound

Lab. no.	bp	Error	Cal. 2σ	δ ¹³ C	Material	Phase	Context
[G] Cladh Muire, Barabhas, North Uist (McLeod Rivett 2018: 84)							
SUERC-38652	1755	30	236–384 CE	–20.3	human bone, left radius	2	long cist inhumation, sexed female
[H] Sloc Sàbhaidh, Baile Sear, North Uist (Tucker and Armit 2009: 216; Wallace 2011)							
SUERC-24964	1760	30	234–381 CE	–20.9	sheep bone	2	Partially articulated sheep burnt in situ in deposit dug into wheelhouse floor
SUERC-24966	1745	30	242–401 CE	–19.8	(human?) mandible	2	Mandible placed on top of deposit of animal remains dug into wheelhouse floor
[M] Sanaig Mhór, Islay (Cook 1999; Tucker 2010: 540)							
GrA-17600	2620	40	899–596 BCE	NA	cremated human bone (bioapatite)	1	cist containing cremation burial (Cairn B)
AA-26243	2300	50	512–200 BCE	–24.5	cremated human bone	1	cist containing cremation burial (Cairn B)
GrA-17598	2720	40	971–804 BCE	NA	cremated human bone (bioapatite)	1	cist containing cremation burial (cist)
AA-26244	1655	50	255–545 CE	–24.3	cremated human bone	1	cist containing cremation burial (cist)

Table 17.6: Radiocarbon dates from Ytri-Neslönd, Mývatnssveit (Ascough *et al.* 2007: 948), calibrated (by RÓR) using IntCal 20 (a) and Marine20 (m) on OxCal

Lab. no.	bp	Error	Cal. 2σ	δ ¹³ C	δ ¹⁵ N	Material	Context
SUERC-2016(a)	1395	35	593–676 CE	–18.9	9.7	human bone	furnished burial
SUERC-2016(m)	1395	35	1036–1296 CE	–18.9	9.7	human bone	furnished burial
SUERC-2660(a)	1405	35	587–670 CE	–19.3	8.7	human bone	furnished burial
SUERC-2660(m)	1405	35	1030–1290 CE	–19.3	8.7	human bone	furnished burial
SUERC-2017(a)	1175	35	772–977 CE	–21.8	2.7	horse bone	furnished burial
SUERC-2661(a)	1200	35	693–953 CE	–21.7	2.0	horse bone	furnished burial

Table 17.7: Radiocarbon dates from Windbreck, Sebay, Orkney (Sheridan 2006: 205)

Lab. no.	bp	Error	Cal. 2σ	δ ¹³ C	Material	Phase	Context
GrA-30980	1870	40	65–304 CE	???	cattle hair	1	calfskin bag containing cremated human bone found within urn

Table 17.8: Radiocarbon date from Machrins 2a (Becket and Batey 2013: 313)

Lab. no.	bp	Error	Cal. 2σ	δ ¹³ C	Material	Phase	Context
SUERC-38611	1110	25	888–994 CE	???	human bone (first right metatarsal)	1?	furnished inhumation burial

At an unlocated barrow near Stromness on the Orkney Mainland, a sample of a cremated human cranium from human remains found in a steatite urn wrapped in cattle skin was radiocarbon-dated twice using different techniques, with both dates falling across the notional horizon between the Late Iron Age and early medieval period (Table 12.5; Figure 17.1; Sheridan 2003: 169, 2004: 176). Something of a reverse occurred at Windbreck in Sebay on the Orkney Mainland (Table 12.7), where an unburnt calf-skin bag containing human remains was found inside a large urn that was typologically dated to the second millennium BCE (Lamb 1987: 21 §86; Sheridan 2005: 165–166, 2006: 205, Tucker 2010: 277, 404). A sample of cattle hair from the bag was radiocarbon-dated, with the 2σ calibrated range firmly in the Late Iron Age, although the presence of marine carbon may still be a factor here, even if the $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ ratio does not seem to have been published.

In two instances, a cremation burial was found to be covered by a fragment of an inscribed stone: at the Ward, Uyea Shetland covering an urn (SAS 1866: 425; SAS 1892: 260 cat. no. IB 18), and at Oxtro, Mainland, Orkney, covering a small cist (Leask 1863: 51; Petrie 1890: 76–78; Ritchie 1971: 132 §6; Scott and Ritchie 2014: 197 §4). The motifs on the fragments are comparable to what are known as Class 1 symbol stones (Allen and Anderson 1903, vol. 2: 4–5; cf. Ritchie 1997: 37–38), unworked pieces of stone with a variety of inscribed motifs found across north-east Britain, datable to c. 500–800 CE (see Alcock 1988; Henderson and Henderson 2004).

Unfortunately, we are reliant on antiquarian accounts for the various works and excavations at The Ward and the relationship between the cairns and the fifteen/twenty urns (Tate 1865: 344; Anderson 1872b: 544 §15; SAS 1884: 331 §10; Black 1892: 357–358; Sheridan 2003: 169). A sample from another urn was radiocarbon-dated and produced a calibrated date firmly within the Early Iron Age (Table 17.5), making it likely that there were Bronze Age (via typology), Iron Age (radiocarbon) and early medieval (sculpture) phases at the site.

Stratigraphically, the series of cists and urns in short cists at Oxtro were inserted into the post-settlement phase(s) of a complex Atlantic stone roundhouse (CASR or 'broch', drystone houses with intramural features that stood up to seven m tall and dating to c. 400 BCE to 300 CE (Ó Ríagáin 2020: 102–103); therefore, the cists date to during or after this period. Scant stratigraphical information is available for the artefacts from Oxtro (Leask 1863; SAS 1874: 81–6; SAS 1892: 234–235 GD 1–54; 394–395; Robertson 1970: 208; Hartley 1972: 54; MacGregor 1985: 148 and catalogue §291). Some date to the early medieval period and may be from a funerary context: a copper-alloy penannular brooch dating to c. 300–700 CE (Booth 2014: 172–176, her revised Type E;

contra Coffey 1909: 20; Kilbride-Jones 1935a: 131–134; 1935b: 396–397; Grieg 1940: 149), an unstratified copper-alloy plain-ringed loop-headed ring-pin (Fanning 1983: 336 §13), dating to c. 400–1100 CE (Fanning 1994: 15–23) with the possible loop from another cist noted by Petrie (1890: 76). A fragment of another silver brooch from a sub-floor feature has been dated to either the late Roman or early medieval period (Scott and Ritchie 2014: 196), with Graham-Campbell (1985: 299) favouring a Viking Age date; but this may not have been funerary.

Stratigraphical information is also largely lacking for the artefacts from the CASR at the Manse of Harray, Netlater, Orkney, but the inhumations and urns containing cremated human remains do seem to have postdated the main occupation phases at the site (Laing 1866–1868: 68, 70; Petrie 1890: 78–81; 13; MacKie 2003: 225–226; Tucker 2010: 277–278; RCAHMS 2000; Romankiewicz 2011: 112–113; Canmore ID 2030).

At least five cists were reported as containing cremated human remains – some possibly in urns – post-dating the Iron Age settlement phase and predating the church phase after the 1950s excavations at St Ninian's Isle, Shetland (Barrowman 2011: 48–51, 85–86, 187, 192–194). An inhumation from the same phase has a firmly early medieval date (Table 17.5), even if the exact relationship with the probable cremations cannot be determined, it might provide a hint as to their date (Barrowman 2011: 192–194).

Further south in Argyll, during the excavation of the furnished burial of an adult male at Machrins 2a, the partial uncremated remains of at least one human juvenile (2b) and 'a single piece of (probably) human cremated long bone', in addition to fragments of rib and vertebrae that were probably from the adult male, were also identified at the edge of the eroded section of dune (2c) (Becket and Batey 2013: 305; Duffy in Becket and Batey 2013: 308). The artefacts, including a strap-end, copper-alloy ring-headed pin, and iron knife, all seem to have been associated with the adult male, and a sample of bone from this adult male produced a radiocarbon date consistent with the general date of these artefacts (Becket and Batey 2013: 305–309). The cremated human remains might only be dated by association with the other material, but it is unclear whether or not they might represent an earlier burial disturbed by the inhumation of the adult male. Further analysis of this material in terms of stable-isotopes and aDNA could yield some interesting results and help clear up the relationships between this material.

FL: Might this long-bone from Machrins be evidence for the selection of single bones from pyre sites for burial, and is there any other evidence for early medieval pyre sites in your area of interest?

Table 17.9: Reuse of Neolithic and Bronze Age funerary monuments, standing stones, Iron Age complex Atlantic stone roundhouses (CASRs), etc., for cremation burials, c. 400–1000 CE. N = Neolithic, BA = Bronze Age; EIA = early Iron Age; (p)CASR = (possible) complex Atlantic stone roundhouse; LIA = late Iron Age; EMP = early medieval period; VA = Viking Age

Map	Site	Primary Monument	Primary Burials	CE 400–1000 Cremations	CE 400–1000 Inhumations
1	The Ward, Uyea, Shetland	cairn	15+ urns (BA)	[urn with EIA C14]; urn w. early medieval slab	no
3	Oxtro, Mainland, Orkney	CASR	no	urns, short cists, 1 urn with early medieval slab	unknown
4	Manse of Harray, Mainland, Orkney	CASR	no	2 urns with stone covers	cists, pit
5	Near Stromness, Mainland, Orkney	cairn or barrow	prob. urn in cist (BA)	same urn in skin wrapping in cist	no
6	Loch Phaibeil, North Uist	cist group	2 cist cremation burials (EIA)	1 cist	no
7	Tote House	cairn	1 prob. crem. cist in cairn (N or BA)	1 furnished burial (VA)	no
8	Baliscate, Mull	standing stone row	unknown	1 crem. in pit	no
9	Acharn Cairn 3	cairn cemetery	cairns with central crem. and inhum. cists (N, BA)	1 crem. in cist (LIA–EMP)	no
10	Cleigh, Kilmore, Lorn	cairn	poss. crem. (N)	crem. in pit	no
11	Kingscross Point, Arran	pCASR	no	1 furnished burial (VA)	no

RÓR: That is a really good point. I think there would have to be further excavation at Machrins to identify whether there were more remains from the same individual, but it does seem as though the long bone was selected for burial in association with the (remains of the) adult male and juvenile. It might be related to the reuse of Bronze Age urns (e.g. The Ward) and the insertion of token deposits into pre-existing monuments (e.g. Cleigh and Balliscate: Table 17.9).

In terms of pyres, I have already mentioned Ardnave, Islay, where oak charcoal was found mixed with cremated human remains on a sand-buried surface (Moore 2004; Ó Riagáin 2016, 2020: 1168).

Two pyre settings, and a possible third, were excavated at Hermisgarth, Sanday, Orkney, found to contain multiple levels of paving and the mixed partial remains of several adults, all undated (Downes and Morris 1998). These settings were located 20m north-west of a pair of cists under a single mound, both of which were found to have contained an adult female inhumation, with two samples of one of them radiocarbon-dated (Table 12.5; Downes and Morris 1998: 611–614). The excavators propose that the stone posts of the pyre settings being bedded in silty subsoil before being covered by the same wind-blown sand that covered the cairn indicate that the pyres and inhumations are of similar date (Downes and Morris 1998: 619), but this is an uncertain proposition, however tempting. Two further cists were c. 120m south-east of the cairn, one of which was heavily eroded, but the other contained a piece of indeterminate thin-walled hand-made coarse pottery and a partially cremated human juvenile with only the

bones from the head displaying evidence of burning (Downes and Morris 1998: 611), described by Maldonado (2011: 107) as ‘so far unparalleled’. It certainly provides an interesting context for thinking about the Machrins 2c long-bone. Returning to the human remains from the pyres and partial cremation to conduct AMS radiocarbon-dating would be very promising and produce results of international importance.

HW: How does cremation relate to monument reuse specifically?

RÓR: What has hopefully been demonstrated here is that the reuse of pre-existing monuments – be they stone rows, Neolithic tombs, cists, urns, or abandoned settlements – had a broader use in early medieval northern Britain, rather than just being a phenomenon associated with the Scandinavian diaspora. Almost all of the examples in Tables 12.1–12.2 involve the reuse of pre-existing monuments. In my 2016 article on Argyll and north-east Ireland, I was fairly certain that this was a phenomenon involving settlers from Scandinavia or the early generations of the subsequent Scandinavian diaspora. This led me to argue that this appropriation of visible markers in the landscape was particularly important in fostering a sense of *Heimat* in settler communities (Doob 1964; Tuan 1977), providing an emotive connection and sense of multi-generational presence in a recently settled and/or contested landscape. I think there is much to recommend this approach, and I have been developing it further by comparing it to the use of castles in Ireland by Anglo-

Norman/English colonists in Ireland c.1167–1350 CE, building further on elements of my PhD thesis.

However, the radiocarbon dates in Figure 17.2 and Table 17.5 demonstrate that the practice of inserting cremated human remains into pre-existing monuments and landscapes also occurred in northern Britain prior to the Viking Age in a variety of ways (Table 17.9). As already noted, the relationship between the inhumations under the cairn at Hermisgarth to the undated cremation burial nearby is potentially problematic. The chronological relationship of the cremated long-bone Machrins 2c to the adult furnished burial and unfurnished child burial exposed in a golf-course bunker is difficult to determine on present evidence; therefore, it is omitted from Table 17.9 – but it should be noticed that the cluster of Viking Age burials at Machrins and Cnoc nan Gall on Colonsay occur in an area with potentially Neolithic or Bronze Age burial mounds and dispersed domestic structures (Ritchie 1981; Becket and Batey 2013: 314–316; Ó Ríagáin 2020: 1158–1163). The probable pyre at Ardnave also occurs within a wider settlement and funerary landscape dating to the Neolithic to late medieval period (Ritchie and Thornber 1983; A. Ritchie 2005; Ó Ríagáin 2020: 879–880, 886–891), but it is not itself a direct reuse of a pre-existing monument.

Due to the nature of many of the excavations referred to in Table 12.8, which range from reports of nineteenth-century works, antiquarian explorations, to more recent rescue and research excavations, it is uncertain as to whether these were all token deposits of cremation human remains or an attempt to deposit as much of the post-cremation remains as possible. It would seem as though they were all token deposits of varying sizes, though, if I were to speculate.

One particularly fascinating phenomenon, I think, is the reuse of cinerary urns of a form usually dated to the Bronze Age for the deposition of cremated human remains. Early medieval examples of this occurred at The Ward, Oxtro, the Manse of Harray, and near Stromness, which might indicate that phenomenon occurred mainly in Orkney and Shetland. It also occurred in the Iron Age in northern Britain, though, with examples at Windbreck on the Orkney Mainland (Sheridan 2006: 205). Similar thinking may lie behind the reuse of cists, such as at The Ward, and across the North Channel, the complex relationship between a Bronze Age cist cemetery and a possible Viking Age cluster of furnished burials on Rathlin is worth considering in this respect (cf. Wiggins 2000; Harrison and Ó Floinn 2014: 612–617; Ó Ríagáin 2016, 2020: 1526–1528).

In two instances, what seem to be reused Bronze Age cinerary urns (for a similar phenomenon in early medieval Belgium, see Annaert, this volume) were capped with fragments of early medieval Class 1 symbol stones, as already discussed. The implication here is that there is

a double dialogue with the past, but it cannot be stated as to whether those carrying out the funerary rituals were aware that the material was from two different pasts. That said, those alive in the early medieval period would likely have been aware of what Class 1 stones were, so there may be something more complex at work here—possibly an attempt to parallel the use of a memorial slab on a smaller scale with a cremation burial in an urn. Maldonado (2011: 107) draws attention to a cist located underneath a cairn at Drumbuie, close to where the River Enrick flows into Loch Ness, being lidded with two symbol stones, which is a probable parallel for Oxtro and Uyea. The cist was found to only contain charcoal (Mackay 1885), but cremated human remains may have been missed.

At Oxtro and Netlater, if the urns were Bronze Age in form, they would seem to have been brought from elsewhere and deposited into the post-settlement mounds that formed over complex Atlantic stone roundhouses. The reuse of settlement mounds for funerary activity occurs elsewhere in northern Britain, e.g. at Dùn Mòr Bhalla, Tiree (MacKie 1974: 229–231, 1997: 176; redated Tucker and Armit 2009), and the wider phenomenon has been discussed by Batey (2002). While technically a newly constructed mound in its own right, the furnished burial at Kingscross reused material from the immediately adjacent possible CASR to create a second mound on a prominent ridge. It is likely that in at least some of the instances that settlement mounds were interpreted as funerary mounds by those carrying out the deposition of human remains, in parallel to the reuse of funerary mounds at Tote House and Cleigh. However, a deliberate connection to settlement cannot be ruled out either.

The insertion of early medieval cremated human remains into pre-existing Neolithic and Bronze Age funerary landscapes also has direct parallels with inhumation practices. For example, the major monumental landscape at Machrie Moor and Tormore on Arran consists of a series of stone circles, Bronze Age urn cremation burials, and short-cists with crouched inhumations (Bryce 1860: 502–509). A sample of human remains from a crouched burial in a short cist at Stone Circle 3 was radiocarbon dated, and the associated 2σ calibrated range is 430–579 CE (OxA-V-2166-33, 1554±29bp, Sheridan 2006: 201), with the caveat that a published $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ figure does not seem to be available.

HW: Have any historical sources played a role in the interpretation of cremation burials in your area?

RÓR: Yes, surviving written sources have played a major role in the interpretation of cremation burials in northern Britain, and can be split into two main groups: Insular texts and texts from Scandinavia/Iceland. Their treatment is not always uncritical, though, with information often taken

out of context without due consideration of manuscript witnesses and the date of the texts contained within them, transmission and transcription, authorial intention and bias, intervention by editors both ancient and modern, etc. Treating surviving texts critically within their contexts of production and provenance in conjunction with archaeological evidence has been a major element of my approach to studying the past, as found in my work on the Dál Riata, the Scandinavian diaspora, Anglo-Norman Ireland, for example, and it is here in the case of cremation burial practices too. A critical in-depth study of the appearances of cremation rites in annals, hagiographies, histories and sagas from Ireland and Britain would certainly reward further study.

Iona in the southern Hebrides was a major text-production centre in both Latin and Old Irish, and texts written there and in Ireland circulated in northern Britain (and beyond) right across the medieval period. One such text became the principal exemplar behind multiple sets of annals surviving in Irish manuscripts. It records a major event in northern Irish politics occurring (or was seen as occurring) in 681 CE: the *combustio regum*, or ‘burning of (the) kings’, at Dún Ceithirinn, where an overking and one local king were burned to death by a rival overking (Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill 1983: s.a. 681; Stokes 1896: 206; Radner 1978: 34 §78). This motif occurs across the various sets of Irish annals, and it is also a dominant theme in Icelandic saga writing, not least in *Brennu Njáls saga* ‘the saga of Burnt Njál’ (trans. Cook 2001) and at least seven times in *Orkneyinga Saga* (Vigfusson 1887: 50–51, 51–52, 64, 112, 126, 135, 146). One wonders at the relationship of such literary motifs to the use of abandoned settlements for the insertion of cremation burials at, for example, Oxtro and Netlater.

Turning to hagiography, the self-cremation of Mílú, the former slave-owner of St Patrick in the life of Patrick attributed to Muirchú (c. 670 CE), surviving in the ninth-century TCD MS 52 (*Book of Armagh*, ff. 2r–8v) is worth considering. Mílú is described as *magus* ‘druid, wizard’ and as king of a group, the Bónraige, that lost importance in late antique north-east Ireland. The account of his death might indicate an awareness by the author and intended readership/audience of the use of cremation, as well as being a symbolic account of the transition from ‘pagan’ cremation to Christian practice represented by Patrick. It may also have been a case of suicide as a mode of vengeance’ (Stokes 1890: 295), with his death then on Patrick’s hands, similar to the Irish and northern British phenomenon of fasting against somebody. Another point to consider is that Muirchú was writing around the same time as the 681 CE burning of the kings, which may have provided him with a useful motif.

Cremation burial does appear in multiple Icelandic sagas surviving in late-medieval manuscripts (Price 2020:

225–68), along with synthetic histories produced in Norway and Denmark dating to the twelfth century onwards. The late, retrospective and authorial intention of material such as this cannot be emphasised enough. The series of guidelines for cremation burials assigned to the legendary king Fróði by Saxo Grammaticus in the late twelfth century (Book V §7.6, Jensen and Fisher 2015: 324–325) may be drawing on a similar tradition to the laws relating to funerary practices – including cremation – attributed to Óðinn in §8 of Snorri Sturluson’s thirteenth-century *Ynglinga Saga* (Jónsson 1893: 20–21).

Both Saxo and Snorri may also have indulged in antiquarian speculation based on the excavation of burials or their exposure during farming or building work in Scandinavia and Iceland, just as I am doing. A famous example of this is the looting of several major mounds in Vestfold in the tenth century, notably Oseberg and Gokstad (Bill and Daly 2012). We should also consider late fictional accounts where graves are entered to obtain objects, e.g. *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (Bugge 1873: 209–222) – available in English translations since the eighteenth century – and *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* (§18, Boer 1900: 62–68). Both provide evidence of different ways of interacting with pre-existing monuments beyond their reuse for burial purposes. Whether it was a consideration behind the deliberate breaking of weapons during burial rites at Millhill, Arran, remains to be seen.

Widely read in Britain and Ireland, Saxo and Snorri’s accounts should also be taken in their contexts within overarching histories of the kings of Denmark and Norway, respectively. Both provide a means of contrasting and rationalising pagan heroic legendary kings with later Christian kings. Both are steeped in wider patterns of learning. For example, the Saxo’s account of the funeral rites of Haraldr Hálfðansson and the final deposition of his remains in an urn following an elaborate battlefield funeral (Book VIII, §5.1, Jensen and Fisher 2015: 548–551) owe more to classical texts such as Virgil’s *Aeneid*, particularly Pallas’s funeral and subsequent burials (Book XI lines 29–224, Gransden 1991: 40–46) as discussed by Hilda Ellis Davidson (1980: 124 note 124, 132–133 notes 58–64).

It is worth noting that Joseph Anderson, Keeper of the Museum of Antiquaries in Edinburgh, played an important role in the popularisation of a tenth-century travel account of a journey to Bolghar from Baghdad by Ahmad ibn Faqlān (trans. Stone and Lunde 2011) that describes the funerary rites surrounding a cremated furnished burial on encountering the Rus’ during his diplomatic journey to the Volga Bulgars. Anderson (1872a) translated Holmboe’s Danish translation of the Arabic into English. This was accompanied by a translation of Holmboe’s notes and the addition of Anderson’s own notes, including a discussion of cremation burials across Europe drawing on Wulfstan’s account of his Baltic travels and on the

First Saxon Capitulary associated with Charlemagne, in which ‘the practice of burning the dead is forbidden as a capital offence’ (Anderson 1872b: 526–527). The text is also discussed in the introduction to Anderson’s (1873: cxvii–cxxi) edited and annotated version of Hjaltalin and Goudie’s translation into English of *Orkneyinga Saga*, where it is used to frame a discussion of furnished inhumation and cremation practices in Viking Age northern Britain. On the opening page of Anderson’s (1872b: 536) synthesis of material culture from northern Britain associable with the Scandinavian diaspora, produced after returning from a series of museum visits in Scandinavia, having provided the ‘last quarter of the eighth century’ as the beginning of ‘Viking Period of the Northmen’, Anderson states that:

The introduction of Christianity among the heathen Northmen, in the first quarter of the eleventh century, marks the period to which their pagan customs, and especially the custom of cremation, descended in the north and west of Scotland.

However, Anderson (1872b: 593) also provides an important caveat:

It seems to me, also, to have an important bearing on the chronology of Scottish archaeology if I have been able to show that in certain areas, there was an overlapping of the heathen burial customs within the Christian period, and that, consequently, a distinction must be observed between this intruding cremation and the older cremation of the native heathenism. I think it is conclusively established by the facts that I have adduced, that the custom of cremation was not extinct (as it is usually represented to have been) when the Norsemen were settling on our northern shores[.]

This is a prescient statement by Anderson, even if it has taken more than a century to confirm this proposition via radiocarbon dating: that cremation continued right down to the Viking Age, rather than solely being reintroduced by settlers from Scandinavia or from among the Scandinavian diaspora.

The furnished cremation burial at Kingscross Point on Arran (Balfour 1908, 1909, 1910: 182–185; Grieg 1940: 26–27; Sheridan 2019: 226) would be best associated with this settler community, as is also likely at Tote on Skye (Lethbridge 1920: 135–156; Grieg 1940: 70; Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998: 78; Harrison 2008: 475; Ratican 2020: volume 1, 101, volume 2, 73). This would be due to the combination of furnished burial in line with practices found in Scandinavia and among the Scandinavian diaspora, rather than the presence

of cremation, though. In 2016, I proposed that the token cremation deposits at Baliscate and possibly Cleigh might also be associated with the Scandinavian diaspora, as might the pyre site at Ardnave on Islay, and the cremated human remains in close association to the furnished burials at Machrins (Ó Ríagáin 2016, 2020: 1160–1161). However, in light of the evidence I have outlined, cremation alone would not now suffice to identify this activity with Scandinavian settlers, seeing as cremation burial continued in use in Iron Age and early medieval Atlantic northern Britain.

Methodological advances

FL: What new discoveries or ideas offer exciting new avenues for the study of early medieval cremations? What methodological advances do you see influencing the study of early medieval cremations in the foreseeable future?

RÓR: I think that the most important advance so far has been the use of AMS for radiocarbon dating, enabling the dating of much smaller samples. Coupled with this is the increasingly strong legislation in relation to planning-related archaeology, which has led to far more radiocarbon dates becoming available and old paradigms questioned. We have all been on sites where, for example, a roundhouse has been classed as Bronze Age based on nothing more than the opinion of the most senior archaeologist present. Argyll is particularly lucky in that the archaeologists carrying out the developer-funded excavations are highly skilled practitioners and very diligent in making detailed preliminary results available, followed up by more in-depth publications.

HW: How do you see advancements in isotopic study changing the way we look at (early medieval) cremations? What questions specific to your area might this methodological advancement help us answer?

RÓR: Looking further into the future, colleagues working in stable-isotopic analysis have informed me that methodologies in relation to the isotopic analysis of cremated bone samples are at an advanced state of development. The work of Sam Leggett and Tessi Löffelmann (this volume), to take two examples, is going to lead the field in very interesting directions. This is extremely exciting, as it might indicate the ways in which individuals from a variety of social and geographical background might come together in colonial contexts, or it might indicate the opposite in some instances, which will serve as a reminder that it is to those carrying out the funerary act (the subject) rather than the object of that act we should be looking.

Conclusion

HW: What conclusions might we draw from this?

RÓR: I think the main conclusion to be drawn from this is that human social practices are rarely as clear-cut in terms of periodicity as we might like. Many of the data involved are messy and need to be treated critically and contextually, but increased radiocarbon-dating has demonstrated that cremation practices extended much later than usually granted, as originally proposed by Joseph Anderson in the 1870s, and hinted at in the sequences at sites like Oxtro and Netlater, where cremation burials

post-dated Iron Age settlements. If such a large portion of dated cremation burials in northern Britain are to be placed in the Late Iron Age or early medieval period, then this raises questions about assigning cremations to the Bronze Age by analogy, on the one hand, or using the presence of cremation to associate burial practices with settlers from Scandinavia without recourse to other categories of evidence on the other. Further programmes of radiocarbon-dating of archived deposits from the sites discussed today should lead to further discoveries regarding the longevity of cremation practices in northern Britain.

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Cremation in Context: Scientific Applications Going from 'Meh' to 'Yeah!'

Barbara Veselka

Studies of cremated human remains have increased tremendously over the last decade, highlighting this relatively understudied category of human remains. Considering that cremation was practised from the Late Neolithic until the early medieval period in North West Europe, it is vital to study these cremation deposits. A multidisciplinary approach is needed, combining osteological, radiocarbon, FTIR, and isotope analysis to obtain a plethora of information, including demographic data, radiocarbon dates, and strontium isotope ratios and strontium concentrations. This enables the detection of in-life mobility, aids in reconstructing diet and health, and contributes to understanding social stratigraphy and other sociocultural processes in past early medieval communities.

Bioarchaeological approach, sex and age estimation, in-life mobility, low countries, palaeopathology

Introduction

Femke Lippok: Can you please introduce yourself and explain how your work relates to cremation practices?

Barbara Veselka: I'm Barbara Veselka, and I'm an assistant professor of Archaeological Science at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel in Belgium. I'm head of the osteoarchaeology laboratory where we examine human remains – burnt and unburnt. Relating to early medieval cremations, I've examined quite some collections (e.g. Broechem from Belgium and Echt from the Netherlands), and I understand the challenge of interpreting them.

Scientific applications for studying cremation

FL: Can you please briefly review the history of scientific applications to the study of cremation practices?

BV: My vision of how this developed is that cremation in northern Europe has always been a phenomenon throughout many periods of the prehistoric and early historical past. Early reports reveal beautiful urns of various kinds containing cremated human remains that would often be thrown away or get stored and neglected. Scientists kept trying to identify ways to work with these remains down the generations: recognising that these human remains might reveal clues and stories. For the Netherlands, it was especially in

the commercial archaeology world that cremated remains began to be analysed (in universities, it was a bit slower). I know that George Maat began to thoroughly investigate cremated human remains (he was a clinician with a big interest in archaeology and developed manuals and standards for practices in combination with various anatomical associations; Maat 1997; Cuijpers 2009). Physical anthropologists started to attempt sex determinations only at first.

It was only decades later that attempts were made to consider bone weight and fragmentation to move beyond age and sex determinations. These early reports usually have limited utility since reports often say 'indeterminate' and mention the bone weight and try to discuss the pyre temperatures, but that is all. At a certain point, Lanting *et al.* (2001) discovered you can do radiocarbon dating on the cremated material, which gives us a far better temporal insight into our collections. The legendary paper by Christoph Snoek *et al.* (2015) illustrated how strontium could be extracted from cremated bone fragments, which helped make the analysis of cremation deposits very popular again. From my perspective, this was a very welcome development since we often couldn't say anything about even the age, sex and pathologies of the human remains. It was always an under-valued category of archaeological material and now everyone is studying cremation deposits, being inspired to develop more methods that will help us to understand the people that practised cremation.

FL: At what point did you enter the scene, and at what stage was cremation research at that time?

BV: I started quite late in my career in osteoarchaeology, with a second Masters in 2012, having already worked for twelve years as an entrepreneurial advisor. Afterwards, I started my own business as a freelance physical anthropologist and participated in several excavations. After about six months, the foundation LAB (Leids Archeospecialistisch Buro), which was tied to Leiden University in the Netherlands, employed me and the core business of my work became cremation grave analysis. At first, it was very daunting dealing with the cremated pieces, having been mainly working on full skeletons of inhumed individuals. But then I realised the importance of the challenge involved in the relatively uncharted territory of cremated bone analysis. So, I always tried to squeeze out the maximum information, promoting the study of cremation, and I published an article in LUNULA (Veselka and Lemmers 2014), which served as extra credit for the doctoral work at Leiden University, where I did my PhD in the meantime. My enthusiasm for studying cremation developed from there. Right from the start, I truly felt that combining the study of inhumated human

remains (to keep the skeleton as a whole in mind) while analysing the small burnt fragments was the best way to analyse cremation deposits. The more experience I gained, the easier it became. The moment I entered the field, it still held the philosophy: 'we need to do this because it is all we have but we don't know what the use of these remains is'. I am happy that the attitude has now changed and that the CRUMBEL project received funding to overcome a number of lacunae. Furthermore, the CRUMBEL project highlights the importance of cremated human remains in bioarchaeological research (Figures 18.1 and 18.2).

CRUMBEL

FL: Can you outline the CRUMBEL project as a cross-period project that builds upon this body of work?

BV: The CRUMBEL project – Cremations, Urns and Mobility in Belgium – started in 2018 and finalised in 2023. It was a very ambitious project that looks at cremation deposits across the country from the Late Neolithic to the early medieval period and going back to older collections and examining the bones. This was a thorough analysis of all the cremation deposits that were available in the entirety of Belgian archaeological collections. We did encounter some collections where the remains were lost, but despite that, there were still very valuable results from many different collections, including even private collections with urns still containing cremated remains. This meant that we found there are more than 600 different collections in Belgium and not all of them are accessible, some are lost, and some are not very well organised. Therefore, the added value of this work was to go back to the older collections and honour their archaeological and scientific value, creating an overview of what is where and then examining them.

My job was to supervise the osteological analysis, oversee the work of students, and also analyse remains myself. We analysed a large number of collections, but sampled an even larger number for strontium isotope analysis. This all was fed into a huge database to explore the big chronological trends: things you cannot see when you are looking at single collections. For example, it allows you to see new trends and gain an overview based on this huge data. It also makes us imagine the potential of repeating this exercise on a larger scale across Europe: even if you have cremations which show us very little on their own, we can use them to identify broader trends in (for example) bone weight, maximum fragment size, and pyre temperatures, all of which can yield exciting new interpretations.

An additional result is trying to find new ways of conducting age and sex determination because still only 20% of the cremation deposits can be sexed and a slightly higher proportion have an age estimation (but then



Figure 18.1: Dr Barbara Veselka at work analysing cremated human remains (Photograph by B. Veselka)



Figure 18.2: Cremated human remains: the subject of our research (Photograph by B. Veselka)

mostly crudely as 18+ years). The collaboration with the Tennessee Body Farm allowed us to do some experimental work on modern cremated individuals of known sex and age to check our methods and develop new ones. There is a lot of work in progress, but we have published new studies which outline new methods, insights, and approaches to the study of cremated human remains (see Hlad *et al.* 2021; Veselka *et al.* 2021a).

Key findings

FL: What were the chronological trends you are seeing? Can you give us some examples, particularly the difference between earlier cremations and early medieval cremation practices?

BV: In terms of weight and fragmentation, it seems that in the Bronze Age we have large fragments that are well-burnt and well-calcined, after which this drops off. By the Roman period, the fragments seem to get smaller, and the burning of the bones suggests to have been uneven, resulting in bone fragments that vary in colour and texture. Perhaps there are sample biases since not everything is in the database yet. Still, it seems that in the early medieval period we have even smaller

fragments and lower weights. Again, the heterogeneity of the burning degree suggests the burning process was not as efficient as in the Bronze Age, which may have been caused by a large number of factors, such as lower pyre temperatures and inadequate fuel. One of my personal favourites is one of the pathological lesions we can see – porotic hyperostosis – is almost non-existent in the Bronze Age and then peaks in the early medieval period. This likely has something to do with diet, but other factors may be at play. It was a surprising finding, most certainly, but what does this shift mean? In my study of the early medieval cemetery of Echt, the Netherlands, I found that about 30% of the individuals had porotic hyperostosis. This is a non-specific stress indicator, which cannot be attributed to a single disease, but usually means the affected individual experienced periods of disease and/or malnutrition (Brickley *et al.* 2020). Although it is not possible to determine the exact cause of the lesion, I hinted towards the possibility of food shortages that could have resulted from failing harvests due to unfavourable climatic conditions during the Late Antique Little Ice Age, which occurred from about AD 536 to 660 (Büntgen *et al.* 2016). Clearly, more research is needed to identify the cause of the high prevalence of porotic hyperostosis in the popula-

tion from Echt, but also compare it to other early medieval sites to make sure it is truly a temporal trend.

Another observation is that there does not seem to be a statistically significant difference in the number of graves with more than one individual over time. I believe there are several reasons for this, besides the obvious one: that there is no difference indeed. Regardless of the time period, there is a relatively low number of graves where the remains of more than one individual were identified. The problem with cremation deposits is that they are often incomplete and identification of more than one individual is based on double unique skeletal elements (e.g. two left patellae, two right zygomatics) or differences in age (e.g. adult and nonadult). If these double elements are absent and no clear difference in age can be detected, the cremation deposit will not be classified as containing multiple individuals. This makes comparison throughout time problematic. In the CRUMBEL project we tested the application of multiple methods to determine a more accurate number of individuals. One of our doctoral students, Charlotte Sabaux, combined the results from the osteological analysis with radiocarbon dating and strontium isotope analysis on multiple fragments from the same cremation deposit. By doing so, she discovered the presence of multiple individuals within the same cremation grave, which was not discovered via macroscopic analysis before. In addition, the individuals were more than one hundred years apart in time from each other, potentially suggesting some form of curation took place for some of the cremated individuals between the burning of their body and their final resting place (Sabaux *et al.* 2021).

FL: Is that pattern exclusive to the cremated dead, or is it also a trend in inhumation graves?

BV: Well, we do not have the skeletons in Belgium, given the soil conditions, so we cannot be sure given our acidic soils. For example, we have the beautiful early medieval cemetery of Broechem with 500 graves, and only one or two teeth survive there, in addition to some discolouration of the soil as a result of decayed bones. That's it! I would love to look at inhumation graves by way of comparison. That is something for future work!

Howard Williams: Do you have a sense of how far ahead in the game you are, or are there other projects that do similar things, or are you exceptional?

BV: Other projects are working on this now, but we are pioneering in the ambition and scale of our work. A biologically available strontium map for the whole of Belgium is being developed as we speak. We increased the number of radiocarbon dates, to fill in the gaps and get a better temporal understanding (e.g. Capuzzo *et al.* 2020; 2023).

We are looking at the way people were cremated (e.g. Stamataki *et al.* 2021; Salesse *et al.* 2021) and try to reconstruct funerary rituals (e.g. Sabaux *et al.* 2021), population dynamics, diet and mobility patterns (Dalle *et al.* 2022; 2023; Veselka *et al.* 2021b).

FL: How does CRUMBEL relate to broader shifts in the archaeological and forensic investigation of burnt human remains on a global scale?

BV: In so many ways we feel we have created a project that has global applications. One of our doctoral researchers, Elisaveth Stamataki, is looking at how we can use certain isotopes to look at the cremation process (Stamataki *et al.* 2021). So, we are not just looking at the people inside the burials, but the ways by which the cremation process was conducted, including trying to work out how the pyres were constructed. This level and approach from all sides are very much applicable to the rest of the world since we are setting the standard for future research elsewhere. One of the methods that we are trying to develop might also be applicable in forensic investigations, thereby collaborating with the Dutch Forensic Institute and the Leiden University Medical Centre, to investigate an issue (I'm not at liberty to disclose as yet) which will be mutually beneficial in the study of past societies and criminal investigations.

The modern relevance of archaeology today is illustrated by our project's methodologies when we have to justify our work to a broader audience of funders and the public. In this context, the collaboration with forensic specialists is vital and beneficial for both fields. Usually, forensic specialists will not be able to easily access certain samples, while archaeologists will not always be able to find funding or get access to expensive instruments. So not only is there a mutual benefit for both fields, it also inspires the development of a broader network and more collaborations to benefit other fields as well.

Implications for early medieval archaeology

FL: What are the likely implications of your work for early medieval archaeology? Does it offer comparative perspectives hitherto lacking? Does it offer specific new revelations regarding cremation practices in the Early Middle Ages?

BV: We have increased the fragments we can use for sex estimations and potentially, we will have a new method for assessing sex which will be tremendously significant if it transpires. I developed a new method for estimating age-at-death, thereby identifying the older adults who were lacking in the archaeological record until now. It will be interesting to see how many older adults can be

identified in early medieval cemeteries, increasing our understanding of several life stages and life expectancy patterns. In addition, I have also demonstrated that vitamin D deficiency is still visible in cremated human remains (Veselka and Snoeck 2021). This is a tremendous step forwards in the assessment of the diseases in populations that practised cremation as their main funerary ritual. Until now, we knew very little about deficiencies and only the presence of porotic hyperostosis, diffuse porosity of the cranial vault, or cribra orbitalia, porosity of the orbits, would tell us that individuals suffered from one or more periods of disease and/or malnutrition. The fact that we can identify vitamin D deficiency in cremated remains is amazing, paving the way for more research to be undertaken. We will have a better understanding of what was happening in the early medieval period in terms of population movement, cultural change, diet, and disease load.

To enable the detection of in-life mobility, I improved the sampling strategy of the *pars petrosa* (Veselka *et al.* 2021c). This is the bone where your hearing is located. Since bone is a dynamic tissue that during life adjusts to your needs, various skeletal elements will have different bone turnover rates. This is the rate at which bone is replaced by new bone to remodel and repair. Since remodelling of the inner parts of the *pars petrosa* (i.e. the otic capsule consisting of the cochlea, the semi-circular canals, and the vestibulum) would lead to deafness, the otic capsule does not remodel or repair after the age of two years (Eckert-Möbius 1924; Meyer 1933). By sampling the otic capsule for strontium isotope analysis, the childhood ratio can be obtained, while the diaphysis will provide a strontium isotope ratio based on foods consumed over the last 15–20 years (Veselka *et al.* 2021c). Differences between the strontium isotope ratios of the *pars petrosa* and the diaphysis suggest a change in the geographical origin of the foods/drinks consumed, being an indication of mobility.

In this context, additional research on the presence of vitamin D deficiency will be undertaken in the cremation deposits of Echt, the Netherlands, to see if the high prevalence of porotic hyperostosis is related to vitamin D deficiency or if, indeed, the result of malnutrition as previously suggested. To put things in a larger perspective, I am currently investigating the cremation deposits from Broechem and Brecht in Belgium and comparing the osteological, radiocarbon dating and strontium isotope results with those from Echt. This allows for the detection of geographical or population-specific differences in diet, in-life mobility, and health.

FL: In this light, can you explain the results from Echt more, please, given that people have tended to see cremation as linked to immigrants?

BV: I have read your article where you argue that cremation need not be seen in this light (Lippok 2020). I might change my interpretations in the future, but based on the information that was available I do think that somehow Echt was surrounded by early medieval cemeteries which had very few cremation deposits or none at all. Everything else was inhumation graves. It is like Echt stood alone, with the majority of it being cremation graves (in the fifth and sixth centuries at least). This is why it seems divergent, and so I built the argument that perhaps these practices were contemporaneous – people were burning or burying – but there was some individual choice at play, with one group wishing for cremation as opposed to the rest. Then we have three–four individuals at Echt that are represented with actually extremely low bone-weights of cremated human material who were also the ones that I postulate to not be from the surrounding area. Of course, a small amount of bone material is easy to transport. I envisioned it as a leather pouch in which you can transport the remains to be buried at Echt. There could be an affinity, connection to a specific place. But then we can ask ourselves: where is the rest of that cremation deposit? Perhaps they were deposited at the place of residence as opposed to Echt being the place of origin for that individual. It's just a theory, but the facts remain that there is a huge number of cremation deposits which is quite the opposite of what we are seeing in the surrounding area in the early medieval cemeteries and that it is how I built the story from that. I'm not saying that cremation practices should be those of 'foreigners' but there might be another way of looking at it that there were 'founders' who were cremated and then a cut-off in the seventh century when we see a shift to inhumation. None of the cremations was later than the sixth century, so there is a significant change. Either they vigorously adopt inhumation, or there was another group of people influencing this trend, or are incomers to the area.

Challenges and possibilities for future work

FL: What key challenges do we face regarding the future of integrating scientific techniques in the social interpretation of early medieval cremation graves?

BV: Because cremation analysis started late, I feel early medieval archaeology and history are way ahead in thinking about cremation practices. There is, however, a clear detachment in these fields from the human osteological approaches we are developing. Sadly, they are often missing the study of the actual people's remains, so why aren't we working more closely together? What CRUMBEL inspires is that we have the potential for interdisciplinary approaches including anthropologists, sociologists, historians and a range of other experts. At the end of the day, my results won't tell me anything unless I place them into

a wider context involving a range of other specialists. I feel this has been lacking and I have felt this for a long time and not only in academic archaeology but also in commercial archaeology. In that context, I would receive the bones without the material culture. While this may avoid biases related to sex identification based on gendered artefacts, how can I understand and interpret the finds dislocated from the context and the material culture? The osteological specialists end up being detached and we need to build an interdisciplinary approach so that the complexity of early medieval cremations can be fully developed and contextualised.

HW: Is this part of a broader relegation and side-lining of archaeological scientists and other finds specialists in the broader archaeological community and processes of archaeological investigation?

BV: I agree, the interpretation is gate-kept by period specialists without considering our scientific expertise.

FL: This perhaps emerges early on in the education system and how we specialise.

HW: I have heard similar points raised by other specialists in the UK contexts whose job is hindered by the lack of contextual information given to them to help them interpret the material they were tasked to investigate.

BV: I would reiterate a strong recommendation that future work sorts out how we teach archaeology and conduct archaeological research that stops relegating not only osteoarchaeology, but also mortuary archaeology across periods and regions.

FL: After all, collaborative work to tell the story of the archaeological record is surely what we are all working to attain.

BV: My Excel file is not the end: it is a means to an end and broader narratives about the human past to reconstruct and understand human behaviour.

Key approaches via scientific applications 1 – New osteological analyses

Being able to detect and specify ages-at-death above forty years (Veselka *et al.* 2021a). Finally, older adults can be identified in cremated remains by scoring the morphological changes to the sternal clavicle end. With this information, a broader range of life stages and attributed social roles can be reconstructed. In addition, a better understanding of life expectancy in early medieval times can be obtained.

Vitamin D deficiency can be detected in burnt teeth, which was not possible before (Veselka and Snoeck 2021). A better understanding of the disease load, the impact of diseases and their development over time, improves our understanding of health in past populations. We still know so little about the disease load and health in populations that practised cremation as their funerary ritual. Each method that allows for the detection of pathological conditions will decrease the gap in our knowledge. Vitamin D deficiency is also visible in animal teeth, allowing the detection of this disease in animal remains with which also the health of animals in the past can be assessed.

Identifying in-life mobility by analysing strontium isotopes in the pars petrosa and the diaphysis (Veselka *et al.* 2021b; 2021c). Differences in childhood vs. adulthood mobility provide information on behavioural patterns and choices made related to age, while sex-linked patterns may suggest matri- or patrilocality and help us to understand the social

organisation of past populations. This method can also be applied to animal remains and assessment of animal mobility will further boost our knowledge of sociocultural habits in early medieval populations.

Current research focuses on the human-animal relationship in funerary contexts. More and more, animal bone is osteologically analysed and their in-life mobility is assessed via strontium isotope analyses. Since animals' bones are usually part of the same cremation deposit as human bone, they are part of the funerary ritual, and their function needs to be better understood.

A specific challenge regarding cremations is that all methods depend on the availability and presence of specific skeletal elements and their absence hinders the analyses. Cremation deposits are very well suited for distribution, and often, the remains are not buried as one deposit in one location. A cremation deposit, therefore, may contain more than one individual, even if the analyses do not indicate more individuals. Observed patterns may be the result of the undetected presence of multiple individuals and this always needs to be considered. Preferably, multiple methods are applied to provide a more accurate overview of the minimum number of individuals. The challenges therein lie in developing more methods that rely on other skeletal elements to broaden the scope of useful fragments, and with this, increase the number of correctly aged and sexed individuals, and to identify more palaeopathological conditions.

Key approaches via scientific applications 2 – New ritual technological interpretations

The use of Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR) provides insight into the structural and compositional transformations of bone during cremation (Stamataki *et al.* 2021; Salesse *et al.* 2021). The bones undergo structural changes because of the cremation process, whereby the organic components, such as collagen, are destroyed. Only the mineral component of the bone is preserved and recrystallised. The amount of organic matter and water still present in the bones can be measured, but also the changes in the mineral component, which will recrystallise. Furthermore, the reducing-oxidation conditions are measured as well as the presence of cyanamide during the burning process can be detected. All of these provide information on how an individual was burned and if the bones were fully calcined.

The analysis of the oxygen isotopic composition of burnt bone apatite carbonate is a complex, since the oxygen present will represent various sources, such as the soft tissues, collagen, and oxygen from the fuel (Stamataki *et al.* 2021). Yet, measuring the oxygen isotopic composition of burnt bone can provide insight into the cremation environment and process, such as the absence of fuel, the position of the pyre in the environment and the position of the body on the pyre. The identification of cyanamide during the burning process may potentially be linked to the presence of footwear (and

potentially other garments) worn by the deceased (Salesse *et al.* 2021).

The application of FTIR and the analysis of the oxygen isotope composition of burnt bone tremendously increases our understanding of the way the cremation process was performed. This is a huge step forward in the reconstruction of the burial ritual, which not only consists of the way the deceased was buried (e.g. within an urn, with grave goods), but also boosts our knowledge of the aspects of the funerary ritual that preceded the actual burial. Especially these aspects have been elusive for a long time, and finally, being able to reconstruct some of them significantly contributes to a better understanding of funerary practices in the early medieval period.

Although these analyses represent key advances in the field, a lot of work still needs to be done. Different proxies still need to be explored to further increase the information that can be obtained from the cremated human and animal remains. One of the limitations is the relatively small number of actual pyre sites. This hinders the analysis of the remnants of the pyre, which would provide further information on the fuel that was used, the reducing-oxidation environment, and other aspects. Finding these pyre sites is difficult since most of them are expected to be gone entirely, while others are not present at the location of the cemetery.

Key approaches via scientific applications 3 – Dating the early medieval cremated dead

The systematic dating of cremation deposits is needed to obtain a high-resolution temporal overview. The CRUMBEL project has been undertaking this, filling the gap in the Walloon region (Capuzzo *et al.* 2020; 2023). Via the use of kernel density modelling, changes in burial practices can be observed using a huge amount of radiocarbon dates. Furthermore, the use of radiocarbon dating in combination with the osteological and isotopic analyses of the cremated human bones demonstrated to be a great way of obtaining a more accurate overview of the minimum number of individuals (Sabau *et al.* 2021). In addition, some of these individuals spanned across multiple generations, which may suggest the curation of one or more fragments over a large period of time. Systematic dating of cremation

deposits as well as dating multiple fragments within the same cremation grave may help identify multiple individuals and aids in reconstructing burial rituals and the social organisation of past communities. Besides the obvious financial challenge of not being able to date large amounts of bone fragments, the selection of fragments can be difficult. If there are clearly two bone concentrations, dating a fragment from both concentrations is the way forward. However, if the organisation of the grave is not clear, dating multiple fragments may not provide additional information and valuable archaeological material is destroyed without gaining more knowledge.

Key approaches via scientific applications 4 – Stable isotopes and aDNA analyses for early medieval cremation burials

The application of the analysis of strontium isotopes is rapidly increasing as a way to reconstruct in-life mobility of both humans and animals. Using different skeletal elements, such as diaphysis and petrous parts, allows us to obtain the strontium isotope ratios from different moments in time, and as such, reconstruct individual mobility during life. In addition, the use of strontium isotope ratios together with the osteological analysis and the radiocarbon dating of the bones may yield a more accurate overview of the minimum number of individuals within a cremation deposit (Sabaux *et al.* 2021). Strontium isotope concentrations can be used to detect age differences (Veselka *et al.* 2021b) and detect changes in diet, such as an increase in salt consumption (Dalle *et al.* 2022). The analysis of carbon and oxygen isotopes in bones help us to better understand

the cremation process and to detect regional differences in cremation practices (Stamataki *et al.* 2021). Current research is exploring the potential of other isotopes, such as neodymium or zinc. Although Gaudio *et al.* (2019) demonstrated aDNA to still be present in heavily degraded petrous parts (including charred ones), collagen, which is the main source of aDNA, is destroyed in fully calcined bones. As such, it is not possible to extract viable DNA from fully cremated remains. Current research is evaluating the preservation of aDNA in various skeletal elements from different environments. As the publication by Veselka *et al.* (2021b) has demonstrated, the multidisciplinary approach to cremation graves from the early medieval period provides novel information on population dynamics, landscape use, and health in a time period for which not a lot of historical information is available. However, this information must be combined with the data generated from the analyses of other materials, such as pottery, metals and beads, allowing a more holistic approach.

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How to Build a Cremation Pyre: Insights from Experimental Archaeology

Austin Mason

Experimental archaeology seeks to test hypotheses about the past by recreating the processes that might have produced excavated assemblages. The approach has been applied to cremation practices by increasing numbers of scholars in recent years, and these experiments raise questions about aspects of the rite that have not always received full attention in the past. This interview focuses primarily on the construction of pyres and the positioning of bodies within them as the central processes of an active and extended cremation ritual, which has been the subject of experiments conducted by the author in a recent undergraduate class. We also discuss the future research and public outreach potential of both experimental archaeology and digital humanities approaches.

Cremation, experimental archaeology, pyre technology, fire, ceramics, mortuary houses

Introduction

Femke Lippok: Can you introduce yourself and your work relating to early medieval cremation practices?

Austin Mason: I'm Austin Mason; my current position is at Carleton College in Minnesota in the US. I'm a lecturer in the history department and director of our Digital Arts and Humanities program. That means I do a lot of digital humanities work across campus, which has taken me away from my primary field of medieval history, but I've been able to move back and forth between those two worlds a bit more recently. My training is as a medieval historian. I primarily studied early medieval Britain and did my dissertation work on the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons. I'm interested, as a religious historian, in the process of conversion and what the long period of Christianisation looked like at the widest population level. So not just at the level of named individuals that show up in the sources, but how people gradually adapted their lived religious practices in this new, changing religious environment. As a historian, I'm trained to read texts, but the texts from this time period don't give you all the information you're looking for to answer these kinds of questions. That's what drew me towards material culture and archaeological evidence over the course of my graduate degree. The changing nature of death rituals, in particular, was very interesting to me. Death and how it's treated in funerary rituals is such a central part of ritual practices for so much of human history. I came at the topic from the point of view of trying to understand how people were living out their religion

in the early medieval period and have been increasingly interested in archaeological sources to answer these types of questions.

FL: Already, I'm going off-script by asking if you actually tackled cremation and the conversion issue?

AM: I didn't tackle cremation directly in my dissertation. That work was structured around the benefits of using material culture to write religious history. Different chapters of my dissertation focused on scales of material evidence: landscapes, grave contexts and the positioning of objects in the graves, animals and animal-symbolism from cremation rites through to symbolism in the Christian context, and one chapter on the human body with the movement of burials and the way bodies are treated in the Christian period. In many different chapters, cremation evidence was a big aspect of my dissertation, but it was not directly the focus of one single chapter or the work as a whole.

Howard Williams: That resonates with some of our other interviewees, who, for the first time, were forced to think about cremation as a single subject. Cremation has never been unfamiliar to them, but it has not before been the primary focus of their research.

Experimental archaeology for early medieval cremation

FL: So, that leads us to the specific issue of cremation and experimental archaeology as a mode to giving new insights into cremation practices, and I suppose the first question we wanted to ask is, what is your sense of the history and the key insights that an experimental approach has been applied before your work in broad terms?

AM: Given my degrees in history, I started largely reading primary sources as well as secondary sources, including synthesis of archaeological reports. Some of that was in monographs, but a lot of it was reading archaeological reports and trying to get beyond just the discussion sections, which are all a lot of historians read, if anything. In my early training, I didn't do any experimental work, but through reading, I learned about some of the earlier experiments. Calvin Wells in the 60s (Wells 1960) and Jacqueline McKinley in the 80s and 90s (McKinley 1994 a) wrote about their experiences trying to process cremated human bone, going to local crematoria and talking to the directors of the facilities, and getting permission to make some modifications to these modern crematoria in order to see how certain factors would influence what the bone would look like after burning. That was really intriguing to me when I first encountered it. As I continued to look for more, I noticed some other people who started to construct

experimental pyres, recreating funerary tableaux and setting them on fire. As I read those accounts, I found myself disagreeing with some of the pyre constructions that people were using. I wondered if that was the way that made most sense. It's only very recently that I got into the experimental side of things. Two colleagues of mine, in the archaeology and classics departments here at Carleton, both work on ancient Greece and have some experience in experimental archaeology. That's how we came to co-pitch a team-taught course on experimental archaeology and experiential history. It was about running the experiments to advance our research, but also about getting students to have a sense of what it was like to live in the past (Morton and Mason 2022). Now we're teaching it every year, rotating the teaching responsibility. The course provides a great vehicle for us to run these kinds of experiments at an undergraduate institution, and to make a start in asking – and hopefully answering – these kinds of questions.

HW: Would you be willing to identify what the key gaps or misinformation are that have built up within those past experimental works? In films depicting the Early Middle Ages, there are certain tropes. It's not so much that people believe it, it's just that the previous film did it so everyone else has to have the same face paint or the same kind of weapons because 'that's what you do in films of this genre'. This seems to even apply to funerals involving cremation in film and television productions (e.g. Williams 2019). Is there a similar thing with these experiments?

AM: Yes, that can definitely be a problem. McKinley published an image in 1994 of what she thought a pyre would look like: it was a log-framework filled with brushwood (McKinley 1994a: Fig. 19, 80) (Figure 19.1). A version of the image was reprinted in Sam Lucy's widely read 2000 book on the *Anglo-Saxon Way of Death* (Lucy 2000: fig 4.1, 105). That hypothetical reconstruction has been one of the only ways that experimenters have reconstructed pyres that I've seen, as it has become a model for most of the subsequent work. This type of pyre is typically built up to 4–6 feet high (120–180 cm) with a big stack of criss-crossed wood, filled in with brush. The body is then placed on top, laid out and left to burn without any further interaction (Figure 19.2). The idea that the fire would have been left untended once lit also comes from an early assumption, stemming from McKinley's work, where she suggested that if the pyre had been stoked, the bone would have been more fragmented than observed (McKinley 1994a: 84). I think a lot of experimenters to date have overbuilt immense pyres, laid out everything on top, set it on fire and stepped away.

There are a couple of problems with this approach. First of all, when you do that, there is so little fuel on top that, especially on a windy day, a lot of the heat would

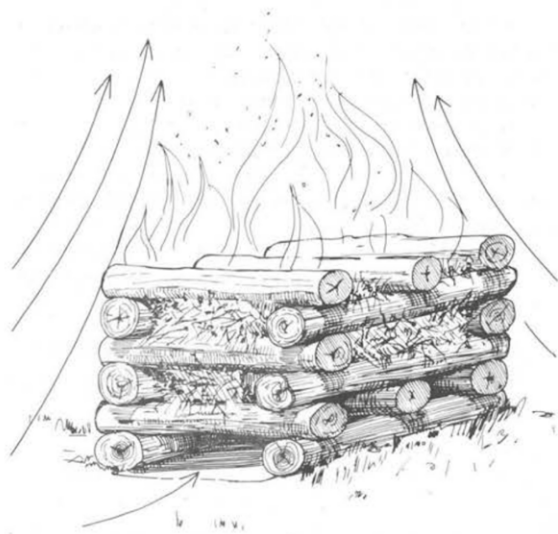


Figure 19.1: McKinley's hypothetical reconstruction of a pyre, showing direction of air flow (Reprinted with permission after McKinley 1994a: figure 19, 80)

be blown away. One experiment with a pig cremation in 2005 concluded that this type of structure had a huge problem, with the wind taking the heat away from the top in particular (Jonuks and Konsa 2007). Eventually, the pyre would collapse, resulting in a little more burning in the centre of the constructions, but generally not enough for a full cremation. McKinley faced similar issues with wind in an experimental cremation on Shetland and had to construct a temporary windbreak to prevent uneven collapse and regain control of the pyre (McKinley 2017: 111).

Another problem is the idea of not tending the pyre. If the goal of a cremation was to create fully cremated bone, I think there would have been much more of an interest on the part of people doing this to ensure that the bone is fully burnt, rather than to make sure that they don't touch it after they light it. From an experimental standpoint, it makes sense to build the pyre and not mess with it to test how your experimental design is performing. But in the past, I think it's much more likely that if it seemed that there might not be enough fuel, people would add fuel on top. You don't have to rake things around to create additional fire; just add fuel on top as the fire burns down in order to fully cremate the remains, which is, in fact, what the pig cremation experimenters found they had to do (Jonuks and Konsa 2007: 105).

A third problem that we attempted to address was the position of the body within the pyre. Calvin Wells suggested, based on not fully calcined shoulder bones, that the body might have lain directly on the ground, with a bonfire heaped on top (Wells 1960: 34–35) (Figure 19.3). McKinley did not agree with this, as she thought the bone would not have been burnt at all if deprived of oxygen

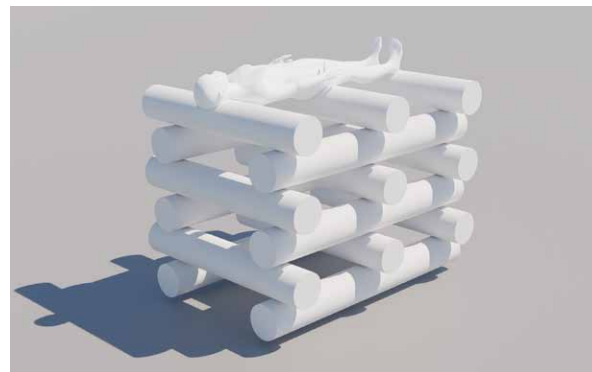


Figure 19.2: 3D model of a log-cabin style cremation pyre construction with body on top (Modeled by Austin Mason after McKinley 1994: figure 19, 80)



Figure 19.3: 3D model of a surface bonfire style hypothetical cremation pyre construction with body on the bottom, after the suggestions of Wells 1960: 34–35 (Model by Austin Mason)

at the bottom of the pyre (McKinley 1994a: 83). Kirsty Squires recently addressed this topic as well, and when comparing the English evidence to ethnographic parallels, came down more in McKinley's camp favouring a body position towards the top of a large pyre (Squires 2011: 79–82; Squires, this volume). Body position within the pyre is one of the main things we tested by placing two linen-wrapped, skin-on pork shoulders at two different heights in the pyre (Figure 19.4). From our experiment, it seems that it's true that laying the body directly on the ground surface would not create a situation where the body was fully cremated. Our body stand-ins were wrapped in linen, and neither skin nor 'clothing' were burnt at all in the sample under the pyre, just as McKinley predicted, but the sample placed on top of the pyre to



Figure 19.4: The display stage of our experimental cremation rite. Two linen-wrapped pork shoulders placed directly on the ground surface (right) to test Wells' theory, and atop several layers of stacked logs filled with brush wood (left) to test McKinley's (Photograph by A. Mason)



Figure 19.5: The results of our experimental cremation with no tending: the shoulder on top of the pyre incompletely cremated on the upper surface exposed to wind (left), while the shoulder on the ground (right) was so well protected from the heat that the cloth retained its colour, and the skin of the shoulder showed no sign of carbonising at all (Photograph by A. Mason)

test McKinley's hypothesis was incompletely burned on the upper surface (Figure 19.5). This has led us to believe that the body was neither on the ground nor at the top of the pyre, but rather somewhere in the middle of that big pile of wood.

I think that building the cremation pyre would be much more likely to have been a multi-stage process, like a burial. Howard has written many times about how cremation

would have been this sort of multi-staged process and not just a single event (Williams 2005: 5, 2006: 86–87). I think that process would have included laying out some sort of lower pyre, where you can have a tableau that's much more similar to inhumation, including pyre goods, offerings, and other substances and materials. It's not 5 feet high (150cm) atop a log cabin construction where people wouldn't be able to really see it. It's down, more like 1 or 2 feet (30–60cm) off the ground, just slightly elevated, more like a bed (Figure 19.6). Then at a secondary stage of the process, more fuel would be added to surround and enclose the body before the pyre is lit. The result combines elements of both proposed methods by ensuring good air flow and sufficient fuel on all sides to fully cremate the body (Figure 19.7).

FL: And what kind of fuel did you use to light your experimental pyre?

AM: We used some fat wood to light it, pine from a stump that naturally has a lot of sap in it, as a natural fire starter to get it going since it was a bit windy at the outset. We took wood from the local surroundings, some logs and split logs, as well as a lot of round wood with some brush material tucked in between. We didn't add any accelerants, such as oil, as has been suggested for Roman cremations (Williams 2004: 276), or ghee, as they do in some modern open-air cremations in India (Squires 2011: 85).

FL: What about an alternative pyre structure as we reconstruct it from *brandgrubengräber* where the pyre is

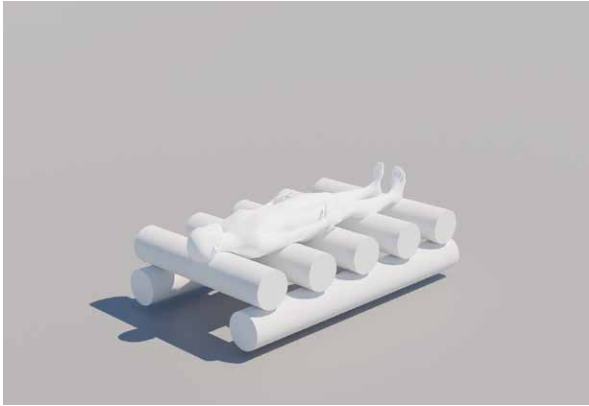


Figure 19.6: 3D model of the proposed display stage of a cremation rite, with the body laid on a low pyre, approximately the height of a bed (Model by A. Mason)

constructed on top of a rectangular pit, ensuring plenty of air can pass underneath the fuel?

AM: I think that's quite possible. But if those kinds of pits were regularly used, I expect they would have turned up more in the archaeological record. To my knowledge, there haven't been any of these found in the UK, although the charcoal layers at Snape seem to come closest (Carnegie and Filmer-Sankey 1993). But a small depression or pit underneath the pyre might have been possible. I think these would have most often been simply surface fires, which is why they're not found. They're essentially large bonfires. You can get the same kind of draft you're describing by constructing a low bed with a couple of cross-wise logs and then some longer ones across to form a little bed off the ground, which would get enough draft underneath and around the body that you wouldn't necessarily need to dig a pit.

HW: We've got some evidence that multiple people or animals were burnt at the same time; there might be a scenario where these pyres might have to be not at all stacked but a broader arrangement. The ethnographic surveys I did for my thesis revealed that most of these experiments don't think of the pyre as anything above or around the body. They think of it as a tool in the burning process (see Williams 2000; 2016). Things like canopies, or elaborate flags, or anything that's there to ornament as part of the structure of the pyre are not even thought of. Have you come across anyone that has addressed those kinds of issues, anyone that's looked at a pyre as something more than just a utilitarian element of cremation?

AM: There was a big event a couple of years ago at Gamla Uppsala where they built a huge, wide pyre and put various animals, foods and objects across it (Hielscher 2014). They laid everything out on top and lit the whole thing

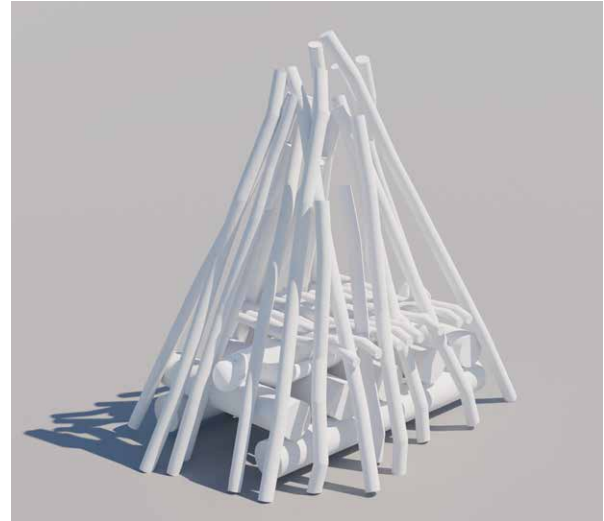


Figure 19.7: 3D model of the proposed concealment stage of a cremation rite, with the body enclosed by more fuel placed above and around the initial pyre before being lit (Model by A. Mason)

on fire. There was enough fuel that there was intense heat, but once it had burnt down, they had to go back and add more fuel to get fully cremated remains (see from 2:30 of the time lapse video at Green 2014). There, they attempted to display the range of things cremated besides a body. But canopies and the like were not used in that experiment.

There are some hints that additional decorations and objects besides the grave goods would have been present in the few written references we have for cremation in Anglo-Saxon England, especially for the higher portions of society. The textual sources, like *Beowulf*, do talk about a pyre being hung around with gold and helmets and additional things. *Beowulf*'s pyre is said to be 'stacked and decked until it stood foursquare, hung with helmets, heavy war-shields and shining armour' in Seamus Heaney's translation (*Beowulf*, lines 3137–3140, Donoghue and Heaney 2002). The poet also says, however, that it was 'the hugest of all funeral fires', which suggests we should be wary of using it as evidence of typical practice (*Beowulf*, lines 3143–3144, Donoghue and Heaney 2002).

HW: And what about the cooling of pyres? Do you think there would have been any practices to accelerate cooling, and how much actual evidence would have been left if you were to actively cool a pyre with water or, as we know from Roman sources, they're using wine at some point (see McKinley 1994a: 78–79).

AM: I haven't done scientific archaeological analysis on bones to be able to track this. I would imagine that if you



Figure 19.8: The concealment stage of our experimental cremation rite, with additional wood surrounding the original pyre stack before being set alight (Photograph by A. Mason)

poured water on hot bone, that would produce some evidence in terms of cracking or breakages, and again McKinley has written the most on this (McKinley 1994b). My understanding is that there has not been a lot of positive evidence for that kind of practice.

My assumption is that for most cremations, the rite was conducted largely by the family members on a smaller scale than in the *Beowulf* example. I like to use the analogy of pottery firing, where similar techniques are used to fire a pot as to burn a body. You start with a wet material with high water-content (clay, flesh) and turn it into a hard material (ceramic, bone) by applying high heat to drive out the moisture through the construction of a bonfire on the open ground. In most cases, active cooling measures would not be necessary beyond waiting until the next day to pick through the cremains and recover the results, whether pots or bones. I think knowledge of how to deal with this type of transformation transferred between those technologies fairly well. You can do the fancy stuff when you're doing the initial display stage, which you then cover up by adding more fuel around that display, akin to covering up a body with earth in a grave. It's both functional and, at the same time, has this concealment element that the ritual requires. Some of the previous discussions on

cremation have not looked much at that aspect. The idea was always that bodies were fully visible whilst they were being burnt. But the practical necessity of having to add fuel above the dead to get a fully cremated body might go hand in hand with the symbolic meaning of covering up and concealing the process of transformation. It's part of the mystery: the body goes into the oven and comes out as a different material (Figure 19.8).

HW: Yes, I'm guilty of this too (Williams 2004)! The hidden nature of the ritual has perhaps not been considered at all: this changes how we think about the experience of the cremation.

AM: The more we did these experiments, the more I looked at modern Hindu rites, and that's essentially what they do: a small bed of wood, a family ceremony around the bed, and then constructing a sort of 'tipi' around the bed followed by the firing. This way, you don't witness the transformation; you just witness the result. These days there are many videos of such ceremonies on YouTube, from local family rites to those of important politicians with much more pomp and ceremony. The 2012 funeral of former Indian PM Shri Inder Kumal Gujral is very suggestive to me of what an important person's send-off might have entailed in the Early Middle Ages (President of India 2012).

Beyond early medieval cremation

HW: What are the broader implications here, beyond early medieval cremation rites?

AM: One thing that this experimental archaeology approach does explicitly is put *chaîne opératoire* at the heart of its method in terms of how you understand material production sequences and also the socio-cultural relations that they reflected and reproduced (Dobres 1999). Applying that lens to death rituals is an interesting process. Åsa Larsson and Liv Nilsson Stutz have argued that cremation should be seen primarily as a way to manufacture bone – literally a technology to produce bone (Larsson and Nilsson Stutz 2014). Thinking about cremation through this lens – of how you go from raw material, the dead body, towards the production of cremated remains that can then be transported or used in further rituals – is instructive. Breaking down the technological sequence by which you get from one to the other has been really helpful for me to think through, and I imagine is more transferrable to the way cremation work in any society can be looked at.

HW: In terms of the post-cremation aspect, the collecting stage, have you been considering what you do with pyres once they've cooled or are cooling?

AM: We did leave it overnight. To use the same ceramic analogy, with pottery, there's the idea that firing pots is a good evening/night-time activity. You can moderate the temperature of the fire by seeing the colour of the flames better at night (Gheorghiu 2002). If that analogy holds and cremation takes place in the evening, leaving the fire to cool during the night and coming back in the morning to sift through the remains would make a lot of sense. You can't really do that at night; distinguishing cremated bone from charcoal is a day time activity. That's what we did as well in our experiments. We had an afternoon cremation ceremony and came back the next morning to collect. The pyre was still smouldering after that, and our pork shoulders that we used to replicate a body were not fully cremated. As a practice, I don't know if it would have made a lot of sense to try to speed up the process of cooling.

FL: The Roman sources you mentioned about pouring wine on it, was that to completely cool down the pyre or is it more ritual in nature?

AM: My colleague who does experiments on Greek ritual fires did pour a little wine on cremains after burning a thigh and tail bone, and the steam and the aroma that comes off the wine, as well as the visual of that steam coming up, is quite powerful. I would be more inclined to say that the Roman evidence suggesting that pouring wine is part of the ritual was more symbolic, rather than functional in terms of cooling the pyre down enough to get to the next stage quicker. It would take a *lot* of wine to completely douse a fire!

HW: Your experimental work hasn't been about sifting through pyre remains, collecting remains of objects and all that?

AM: Not to date. We only did one. Since we didn't achieve full cremation, I took those remains back home to my fire pit and added additional fire on top, then took some pictures and measurements of what the final remains were. In future, I would like to make additional experimental cremations, especially linking it back to the pottery analogy. Going through the bonfire ashes, pulling out the whole pots, some of which would have shattered, grabbing the sherds from the ashes; that process would have been a familiar practice for these people who made their own pottery at the village scale. I haven't done those experiments yet, though.

HW: It's worth flagging up that the analogous technology: that some people have perhaps overplayed an analogy with bronze and precious metal working and iron working in particular. It sounds like our instincts are in a different direction towards a more familiar technology being applied (Williams 2014). Would you agree?

AM: I think so. Pottery and cremation technology are near identical in some ways, more so than any other technology at least. They are essentially making the same exact kind of fire, just on a slightly bigger scale for a cremation firing. It's even at about the same temperature, over 800 degrees Celsius, that both pottery will become hardened and good to use, and the human body will fully cremate. That's my biggest objection to analogies to metal working: the temperatures required are so much higher that you really need controlled circumstances, including directing of air to get to that level. It's a very different material, too – you go from rock to a type of liquid that cools back into a hardened material for casting, or a malleable material that requires hammering for forging. Which is not anything like what the cremation process looks like.

Future work: archaeology and heritage for experimental cremations

HW: An article reporting on the Build N Burn project discusses a series of fire ritual events performed for the National Trust for Scotland, deliberately trying to think about the ceremonial aspects of fire deployment; they weren't trying to do it as a scientific experiment but as a performance for the public (Brophy *et al.* 2017). Among other things, they constructed pyres. Where do you see the links between the research you are doing and the broader educational and potentially public engagement with cremation?

AM: I do think there is a lot of potential there. My experience with students is that the visceral experience, even if you don't have the experience of transformation of a dead body, the experience of being near the heat of the fire forces you to stand back. This is a whole different thing than a campfire; so much more intense and slightly scary to have a fire that big. It has the potential to get out of control which brings with it a tension when witnessing it, that could really have an impact on the public. This is not a casual thing. There is a power to it that could, with the right framing, help people understand that cremation is something that can have a lot of meaning and hold lots of symbolic and religious significance for people. Educationally, it's clear from my student's reflections that these experiments are of great benefit (Hoffman *et al.* 2021). Publicly, there is great potential to employ experimental cremations as well. Some people, like Paul Duffy have done some work on this. There is a YouTube video of a public experimental cremation they did on the Isle of Bute as part of a family midsummer celebration (DiscoverBute 2011). It was a big pyre with a pig on top with a couple dozen people around watching it. I imagine that this type of performance could be extremely powerful, especially in conveying the meaning of historical practices in a place where cremation potentially took place at some point in time.



Figure 19.9: The final stage of our experimental cremation rite: building a wattle-and-daub mortuary house and depositing the cremated remains in a ceramic urn inside (Photograph by A. Mason)

HW: Do you feel there are any other untapped or poorly researched aspects of early medieval cremation practices where experimental work might shed further light beyond the pyre technology aspect?

AM: Given how my thoughts on the process have noted parallels with ceramics production, I have wondered if the urns themselves could have been fired on the same pyres. There's been a long-standing debate over whether the urns were made especially for the dead or were repurposed pre-existing vessels (Perry 2011; Perry, this volume). If we assume that the urns were made for the dead, you have a period of up to a week between the person's passing and the cremation for gathering family and preparing supplies. There would have been plenty of time to make a pot and let it dry before you put it on the pyre with everything else, before firing, letting it cool, and finally putting the cremated remains in it. I think it's possible, given the similar temperatures reached and the construction of the kind of pyre I envision. That's something that I would be very interested in trying in future experiments: to not only have a body-stand in but also have some unfired pottery on the pyre and see how that goes.

There is also the question of the curation of urns before they're finally deposited in the ground. How long would an urn have been kept above ground, circulating among the living, before it was deposited in the communal, central cemetery, like, for example Spong Hill? I would like to explore some experiments where you keep cremated remains in pots above ground for different periods before burial, and see what potential traces those differences leave in the archaeological record. That would obviously have to be a long-term study, but potentially really interesting.

HW: We should have the West Stow Anglo Saxon village put these urns around the houses and see how many are accidentally knocked off shelves. How many survive a year, especially with school-kids visits! What about the post-built 'mortuary houses' inferred from post-holes on some cemeteries (Meyers Emery and Williams 2018)?

AM: As our final project of the experimental archaeology class, we did build a mortuary house, which is another aspect of death rituals I'm really interested in — those four-post structures that are found at some cremation sites like Apple Down (Down and Welch 1990). We attempted to reconstruct one of the metre square structures excavated at Apple Down with wattle and daub walls, a turf roof on one side, and a thatched roof on the other (Malter *et al.* 2021). We took the remains from the cremation experiment and put them in a replica urn that I'd made with a previous class. We placed the pot with the remains inside the structure, and it was very visible where we left it (Figure 19.9). When we returned to the structure later to see how it was decaying over time, we found that somebody had desecrated it. Basically they had grave-robbed our site, taking the pot out of the house and dumping the cremated remains out onto the ground. That was shocking to me and so interesting that that happened, as it's what often happened historically as well. The location of our structure was kind of at the edge of campus, with walking trails nearby, so anyone could have accessed the site. It was fascinating to see how post-burial treatment ended up interacting with the local population. If we did more of these experiments, I would like to continue to use the same space but bury them in different ways and look at the post-burning stage of the cremation rites in more detail.

HW: That's all the questions I had; the only feeling I get is that this type of experimental archaeology is kind of disparate. Perhaps that's unfair because I might not have kept track of this research, but I get the sense that you get people talking about one single pyre experiment, and one does wonder when this type of work will be more centralised, hopefully producing some broader

data to fall back on. I'm not trying to be dismissive, but it would be great for someone to do thirty or forty of these experiments.

AM: Yes, I totally agree, and I think the place to do this would be at a location where historically, a lot of cremation took place. A place like Uppsala makes a lot of sense, but so does Sutton Hoo, for example. In a place that already has an organisation and is a big tourist draw, you could partner with them to get a sustained experiment going on site. Experimental living history museums like Lejre in Denmark have done some of this kind of work, and there are more being built recently, like the YEAR centre in York, but it would be great to have new cremation experiments run at these sites.

HW: What about other avenues of research that add to the study of cremation?

AM: As an American researcher, one of my main frustrations is the inaccessibility of material. When it came to studying urns, for example, I was dependent on the published reports or images that museums or other holding institutions have made available. Published reports often depict the classic urn with only a quarter version of the decoration and a profile of the other side. Julian D. Richards pointed out (Gareth Perry also has a lovely point about this, this volume) that this convention 'makes a nonsense of their intended appearance', since these designs were meant to be seen as a whole, and from above where their circular patterns in many cases closely mimic the symbols used on annular brooches (Richards 1992: 145). I wanted to see just how similar designs from pots and annular brooches were when extracted from those materials. Especially because these artefacts are so often separated when studied, by ceramic and non-ferrous metal working experts, respectively. So, I have been trying to see if you could make 3D models of urns and brooches to better extract and compare their designs. You can make 3D models from photographs with a process known as photogrammetry, but it requires many more photos than typically taken for archival purposes. I have been able to access and photograph a few collections of urns in Norfolk and Lincolnshire, and I found it very rewarding to put those 3D models together (e.g. Mason 2016). Even the practice of taking so many photographs makes you view these pots differently since you are forced to look closely at every angle and surface. 3D models are also really helpful in public outreach, especially if they can be embedded in a reconstruction of what the entire cremation process would have looked like. On that digital humanities side, I've done a lot of spatial work using GIS, modelling software, and video game engines to make it possible for people to

walk around and explore recreated historical environments (Ottaway and Mason 2021). For a long time, I've had a goal to recreate a 3D experience of a cremation event. People could interact and discover the variability that would have been possible in these rites.

HW: In the back of my mind, I have seen a digitally reconstructed landscape with a pyre in the background (which I cannot now locate). There is a whole issue here with how we're engaging with this. At Sutton Hoo now, there is a new visualisation of the entire site on display. In some ways, it's an improvement, but it still does not put much emphasis on cremation. They're asking the visitor to imagine a pyre on a hill, but people would just not know what that looks like exactly unless it's disaster footage on the news. How are you expecting people to understand that this is a primarily cremating landscape, both Tranmer House as well as the Sutton Hoo spurs (Williams 2022)? Millions of visitors are focusing on the ship without a sense of the cremation of the dead in this landscape. This is such a shame, and reconstructions, like you're talking about, would go a long way in evoking some sense of the power of fire rituals.

AM: I've done some work with the Gressenhall Museum of Norfolk Life, which is near the large cremation cemetery of Spong Hill, and happens to be where the East Anglian Archaeology offices are housed as well. When I wandered around the area of the Spong Hill cemetery, which is on private land, there was no indication whatsoever of the massive site that had been excavated there. For such an important site, it's baffling that there are no indicators of what had gone on there in the past. Other sites I've visited are similarly unmarked, and while I know there are privacy and looting concerns, I think 3D recreations and site-specific Augmented Reality applications have amazing potential to engage the public with cremation. Especially as nowadays cremation has become so much more the standard funerary rite.

HW: I agree, the same goes for Indigenous peoples, and how many people were cremating in the past there. There must be potential for sensitive community outreach and discussions about the diversity of death rituals.

AM: Digital immersive technologies and experimental archaeology both draw out the details of process that are so important to so many death rituals; not just what was done, but how it was done, by whom, and for how long. I am really excited for the future insights these approaches can offer into cremation practices in many times and places.

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CREMATION IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

Cremation in the Early Middle Ages draws together the latest research and thinking on early medieval cremation practices. The book takes you on a journey through 19 chapters exploring cremation practices from the fifth to the eleventh centuries CE in Fennoscandia, the UK and Ireland, Frisia, Denmark, Germany, Belgium, and France. In this way, the book aims to be a central resource for anyone interested in early medieval cremations, or indeed funerary practices more generally. Notably, the structure and style of this book represent a departure from the norm. As well as a co-authored introduction, chapters constitute a conversation between the editors and key researchers captured via structured interviews, supported by a series of fact boxes highlighting key ideas, methods and techniques, sites, graves and discoveries.

Cremation was no single disposal tradition in the Early Middle Ages: it constituted but one dimension of local, regional and supra-regional deathways operating across different locales and with varying degrees of expenditure, meanings and materials, as well as involved a complex range of resources, environments, practices and performances both before, during and after the burning of the bodies. Where cremation is not the dominant burial rite, our authors reflect on the potential under-representation of cremation in our models. Ethnic and cultural labelling of the early medieval cremated dead are countered and critiqued by various authors.

Important themes that are touched upon are the long-term collectivity and *longue durée* of cremation depositions, variability within cremation practices, the pre-burial life of cinerary containers, ideas of personhood, the immersion of cremains in watery locations, the socio-political and economic context of burial rites, monumentalisation, the interpretation of mixed-rite (bi-ritual) cemeteries, the importance of human-animal entanglements viewed through the lens of cremated deposition, the potential for greater experimental and osteoarcheological, experimental, isotopic, radiocarbon, and genomic research, and the effect and usefulness of written texts as a window onto early medieval cremation practices, in particular regarding the relationship between cremation and Christianisation.

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